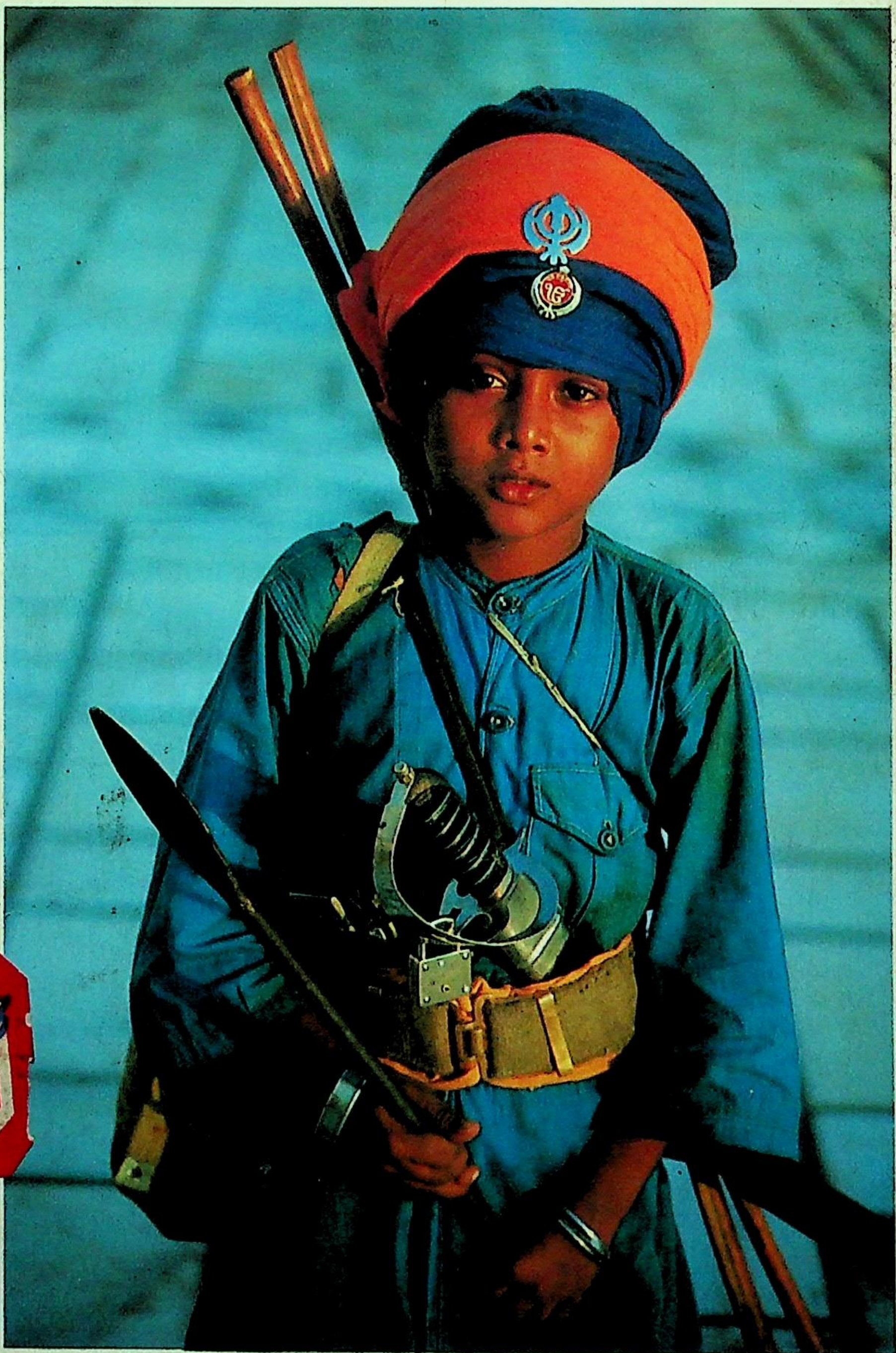
THE SIKHS

Khushwant Singh
Raghu Rai



The Sikhs are much the most colourful community of India. Though much has been written about their prowess as India's best farmers and soldiers, never before has their way of living, their modes of worship, their baptisms, weddings, their rustic dances and their attempts to keep alive their martial traditions been more vividly captured by the camera or as clearly explained in words. Why do all Sikh males wear turbans and beards? Does the colour of the turban signify anything? Why are all Sikh men called Singhs and all Sikh women Kaur? This book answers such questions, and much more: their turbulent history, their spartan faith in one God, their ten Gurus and the casteless fraternity of the Khalsa Panth; the factors that have gone into making the Sikh a go-ahead, assertive and extrovert people full of the zest for living and committed to the ideal that anything that anyone else can do, a Sikh can do better.

In this book you will see a rare collection of photographs taken by one of India's best photographer, Raghu Rai. He travelled extensively over India, and being himself a Punjabi, has been able to portray the Punjab countryside and its peasantry as only an artist could have done.

THE SIKHS

TEXT
Khushwant Singh

PHOTOGRAPHS
Raghu Rai

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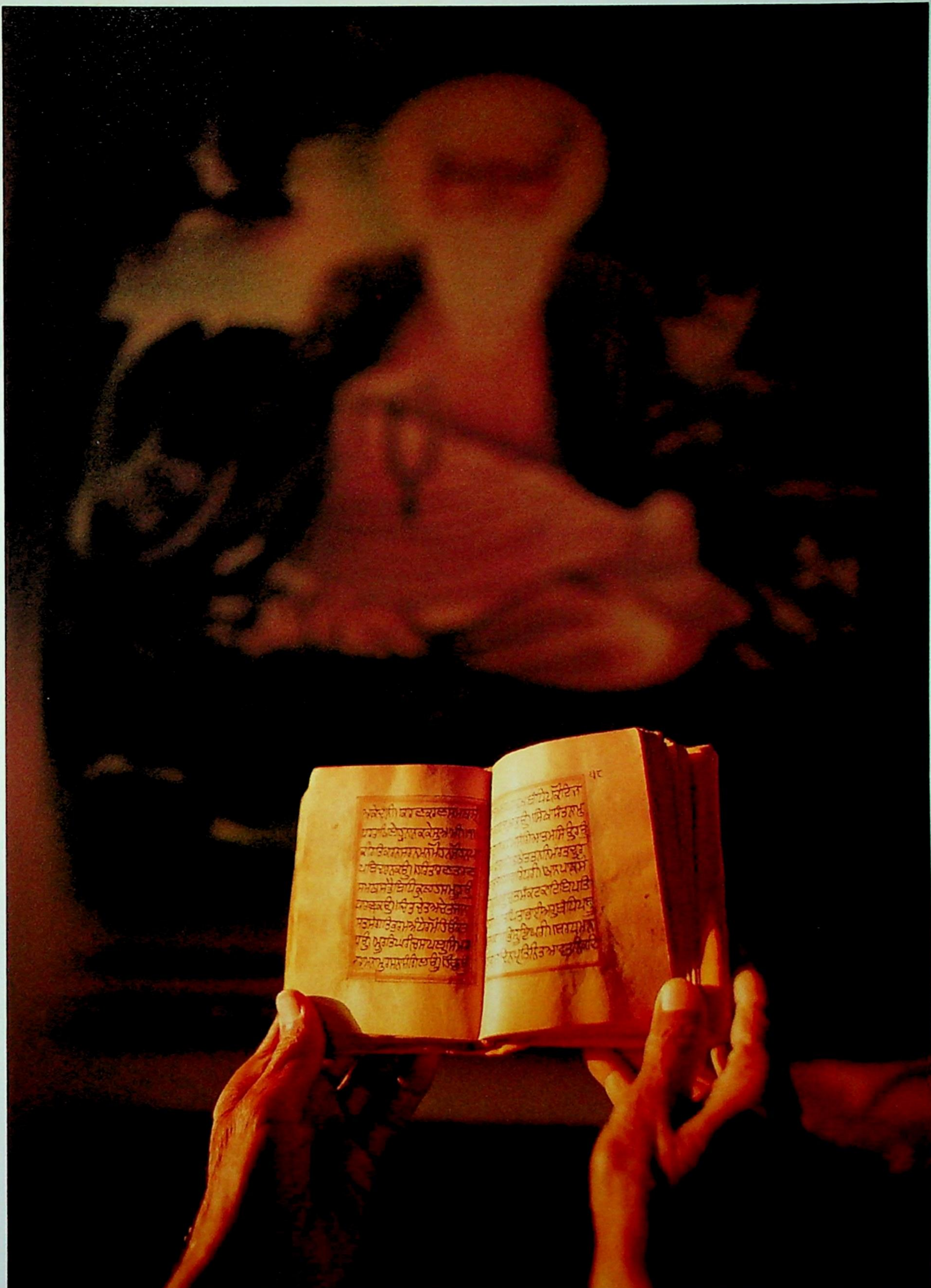
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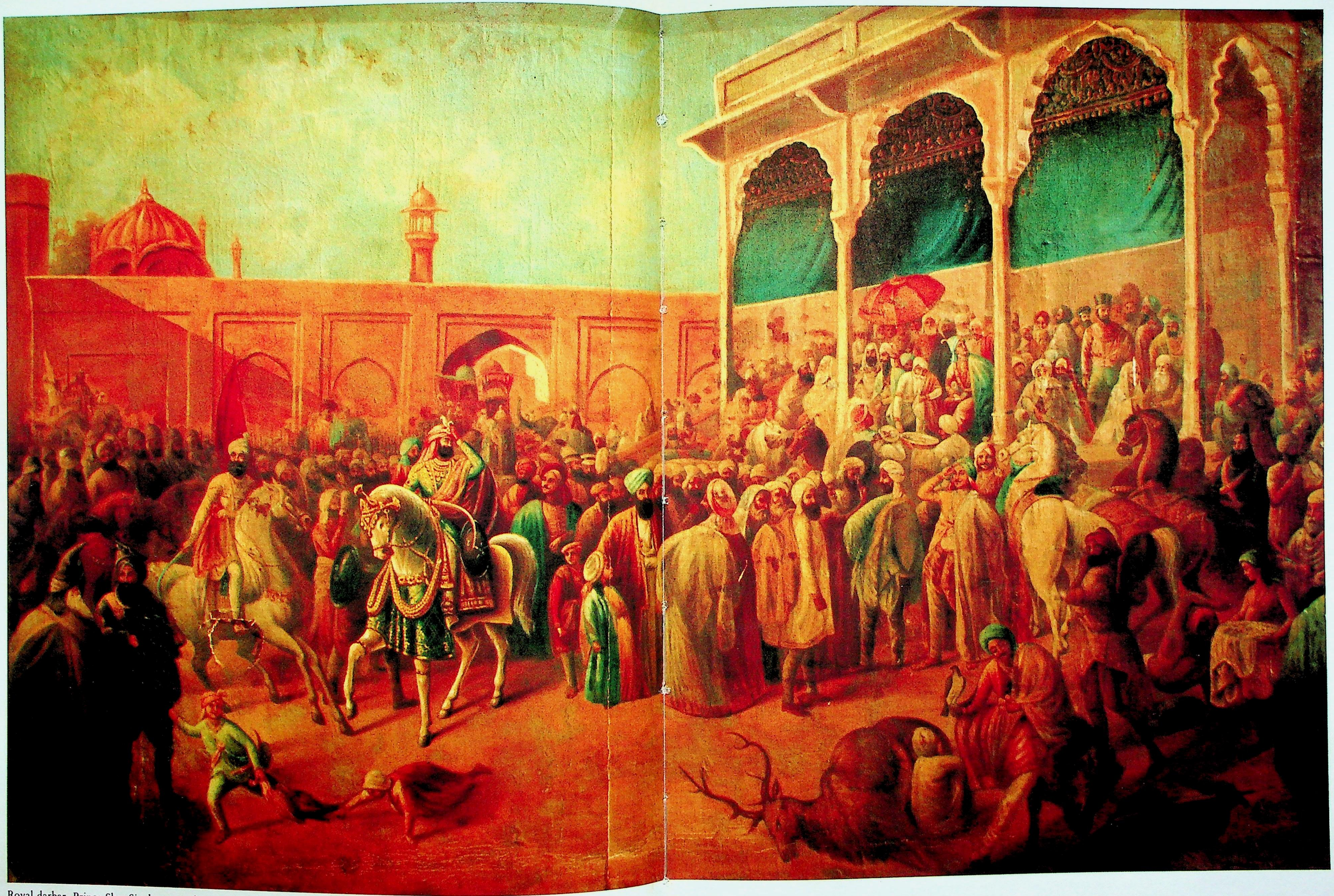
Frontispiece: Harimandir, the temple of God, better known as the Golden Temple of Darbar Sahib.

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To my parents
Sardar Bahadur Sir Sobha Singh and
Lady Veera Bai Sobha Singh



Praying to the Guru. A small prayer book (*gutka*) of daily prayers (*nitnem*) is to be found in all Sikh homes. Though idol worship is forbidden, pictures of Guru Nanak often become objects of devotion.



Royal darbar. Prince Sher Singh returns from a hunt and presents himself before his father, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Painting by Auguste Theodore Schoefft.



Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708), the last of the Sikhs' ten Gurus, on horseback, Chandigarh Museum. Courtesy M S Randhawa.

ASK A SIKH how many of them there are in the world and he may well reply one and a half billion. This is a vast but understandable exaggeration as every Sikh looks upon himself as *Sava Lakh* (equal to 125,000) or a *fauj* (army). Actually, there are no more than 12 million Sikhs most of them concentrated in the Punjab, which is on the north-western frontier of India bordering on Pakistan.

Sikhs appear to be many more than they really are because of their distinct appearance: all adult males wear turbans and sport beards. As a matter of fact they form less than 2 per cent of India's 700 million people. They can be seen all over India: driving taxis and trucks from northernmost Kashmir to southernmost Kanyakumari and from the western seaport of Bombay to the easternmost jungles of Manipur; they farm lands in the remote malarial swamps of Nepal Terai and the once desert wastes of Ganganagar district of Rajasthan. There are Sikh shopkeepers, tradesmen, industrialists, academicians, lawyers, doctors, civil servants, and just about everything else, scattered all over the country. However, their largest concentration is not in their homeland Punjab, but in the Capital, Delhi.

The Sikh's favourite profession is farming; over 80 per cent of the community live off the soil. And next to farming, soldiering; at one time almost a quarter of the British Indian Army were Sikhs; even today one out of every ten Indians in uniform is a Sikh.

The Sikhs have a lot in common with the Jews: indeed most Sikh patriarchs look like Jewish rabbis. Both the Jews and the Sikhs have known persecution; the Jews for nearly 2,000 years at the hands of the Christians and Muslims; the Sikhs for about 200 years at the hands of the Muslim conquerors and

rulers of northern India. It never got them down. Like the Jews the Sikhs regard themselves as the chosen people. A well-known Sikh historian wrote: 'Where there is one Sikh there is one Sikh; where there are two Sikhs, there is an assembly of Saints; where there are five Sikhs there is God.'

Not many people share the Sikh's self-esteem. On the contrary they regard them as slow-witted and aggressive, rustic types good only to be used as cannon-fodder. 'The only culture the Sikhs know is agriculture', they say. There is some truth in these back-handed compliments. They happen to be India's best farmers. They, more than any other people, have brought the Green Revolution to India by trebling the wheat yield of the acre and are much the most prosperous peasantry of India. In a country teeming with beggars it is rare to see a Sikh stretch out his hands for alms. Their aggressiveness is born out of an innate sense of one-upmanship—anything anyone else can do, the Sikh can do better. Three of the nine Indians who scaled Mount Everest were Sikhs; more than a third of all India's athletic teams are usually Sikhs. A clue to what makes the Sikh ethos can be found in their religion and history.

The Sikh Gurus

The word Sikh is derived from the Pali *Sikkha* or the Sanskrit *Shishya* meaning disciple. The Sikhs are disciples of their ten Gurus or teachers beginning with Nanak (1469–1539) and ending with Gobind Singh (d. 1708).

Nanak was born a Hindu. The family belonged to a subsect known as the Bedis—those who know the Vedas. Nanak grew up to be a precocious child. He was indifferent to his studies and instead of reading his school-books, he sought the company of itinerant Hindu and Muslim holy men and had long discourses with them. He was the despair of his parents as he would not attend to the family business and squandered whatever money his father gave him in feeding the poor and the hungry. When he grew to be a young man a marriage was arranged for him. For a time he devoted himself to his wife and the two sons she bore him. Then the search for truth became too overpowering and he abandoned his home to become a wanderer. He fasted, prayed and meditated. He thought of the misery that centuries of war between the Muslims and Hindus had brought on the people of the Punjab. His study of the two religions also showed him that there was much in common between Islam and Hinduism. He had heard of and read Muslim divines like Farid and Kabir as well as Hindu saints like Ramanand and Namdev, all of whom emphasised what was common between the two religious systems. He was convinced that what the country needed was someone who could bring the two faiths and the two peoples closer to each other. He also came to the conclusion that this could not be done by an ascetic who cut himself off from the world but one who lived amongst the people and sought to change them by precept and example. He started his mission with a simple statement: 'There is no Hindu, there is no Mussulman.' He took as his companions an aged Muslim musician, Mardana, and a Hindu peasant, Bala, and the three went preaching from village to village.

Nanak composed his sermons in verse which Mardana set to music,

and the two sang them to the accompaniment of the lute. Nanak's teachings fired the imagination of the peasantry of the Punjab and large numbers of followers gathered round him. Within a few years these disciples (*shishyas*) became a homogeneous group whose faith was exclusively the teachings of Nanak. The *shishya* became the Sikh (Punjabi form of the Sanskrit word). Nanak travelled all over India. He went as far east as Assam and as far south as Sri Lanka. He went westwards beyond the borders of India to Mecca and Medina. Wherever he went, he sang his hymns which told the people that if they wanted to love God they should first learn to love each other. Nanak never made any claims to kinship with God nor did he clothe his hymns in the garb of prophecy. He was content to be a teacher or Guru. His crusade was against fanaticism and intolerance which had become the practice of the ruling class of Muslims and against meaningless ritual, discriminations against lower castes and women, which had become an integral part of Hindu life. It was a crusade without any anger, violence or recrimination. He was a man of gentle ways possessed of a kindly sense of humour. Two incidents in his life illustrate his method of approach. Once, on the banks of the Ganges he saw Hindus throwing water to the rising sun as an offering to their dead ancestors. Nanak facing the opposite direction also began to throw water. When questioned, he answered simply: 'I am watering my fields. If you can send water to the dead in heaven, surely I can send it to my village in the Punjab!' On another occasion, he happened to fall asleep with his feet towards Mecca. An outraged mulla shook him rudely and drew his attention to the fact. 'Brother', replied Nanak calmly, 'if you think I show disrespect by having my feet towards the house of God, then turn them in some other direction where God does not dwell.'

Nanak's religion was an austere monotheism which disapproved of idol worship and the Hindu division of society into castes and subcastes. It was also based on the work-ethic: *kirt karo* (work), *wand chako* (share what you earn with the less fortunate), *Naam Japo* (take the Name of the Lord). Nanak emphasised the role of the Guru as the guide, of the community (*sangat*), of hymn singing (*keertan*) and of breaking bread together (*Guru ka Langar*).

Nanak spent the last years of his life with his family in Kartarpur village where he raised the first Sikh temple, Dharamsal (Abode of Faith) which later became the *gurdwara* —gateway of the guru. People flocked to hear him sing his hymns and preach the unity of Islam and Hinduism. When he died, his body became a subject of dispute. The Muslims wanted to bury it, the Hindus to cremate it. Even today Nanak is regarded as the symbol of fraternity between the two major communities. A popular couplet describes him as:

Guru Nanak Shah Fakeer
Hindu ka Guru, Mussulman ka Peer.

Nanak left a following of people dissenting both from Hinduism and Islam. His nine successors moulded that following into a community with its own language and literature, its own religious beliefs and institutions, and its own traditions and conventions.

Although Nanak had two sons, he chose a faithful disciple, whom he named Angad, to succeed him. Angad (1504–52) adapted the script used by the money-lenders of northern India to compile the writings of his master and gave it the name Gurmukhi—From the mouth of the Guru. He also set up centres from where the teachings of the founder could be propagated. On his death, Angad chose one of his disciples, the aged Amar Das (1479–1574) to be the third Guru. Amar Das appointed his son-in-law, Ram Das, to be the fourth Guru. Ram Das (1534–81) had a large tank dug which he named Amritsar (the Pool of Nectar) and started raising a town around it. This town, initially known after him as Ram Das Pura or Chak Ram Das grew into a prosperous city which came to be known, after its pool of immortality, as Amritsar. Ram Das's son Arjun, the fifth Guru, had a Muslim divine, Mian Meer, lay the foundation-stone of an island temple in the midst of the pool which he named the Harimandir (the Temple of God). Arjun (1563–1606) took other steps to give the Sikhs the feeling that they were a community distinct from the Hindus and the Muslims. He collected the hymns composed by his predecessors, those of Hindu and Muslim saints and added to them his own compositions. This anthology of sacred writings came to be known as the Granth Sahib and became the scripture of the Sikhs just as the Vedas were of the Hindus and the Koran of the Muslims. He installed the first copy of the Granth in the Harimandir. Arjun's greatest contribution to the Sikh faith was to give his life for it. Emperor Jehangir was perturbed by the Guru's growing influence amongst the people. Under royal instructions the Govenor of Lahore had him arrested on a frivolous charge and subjected to severe torture, which resulted in the Guru's death. This was on 30 May 1606. Arjun became the first of a long line of Sikh martyrs.

One of Arjun's compositions shows how within a hundred years of the death of Nanak, the Sikhs had freed themselves from their connections with the two parent communities:

> I do not keep the Hindu fast, nor the Muslim Ramadan,
> I serve Him alone who is my refuge.
> I serve the one Master, who is also Allah.
> I have broken with the Hindu and the Muslim.
> I will not worship with the Hindu, nor like the Muslim go
> to Mecca.
> I shall serve Him and no other.
> I will not pray to idols nor say the Muslim prayer.
> I shall put my heart at the feet of the one Supreme Being.
> For we are neither Hindus nor Mussulmans.

After the martyrdom of Arjun the Sikhs began to change from a pacifist to a martial people. Arjun's son, Hargobind, who succeeded him as the sixth Guru, organised his following into an army. The final transformation of the Sikhs into a militant sect came with the last of the ten Gurus, Gobind Singh. In 1675 young Gobind's father, the ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur, was summoned by the Mughal

Emperor to Delhi and ordered to accept conversion to Islam. The legend goes that he offered to show the Emperor a miracle whereby no sword would be able to sever his neck. He wrote some words on a slip of paper and tied it around his neck with a piece of string. When the executioner cut off his head, the message on the paper was read: '*Sees diya pur sirr na diya*'—'I gave my head but not my secret'.

Gobind succeeded to the guruship at the tender age of nine. He spent his boyhood in Patna, where he was born, studying Persian and Sanskrit and learning the arts of war. Later, at Anandpur, the town founded by his father in the foothills of the Himalayas, he began to organise the Sikhs into a fighting force. He described his mission of life in the following words: 'To uphold right in every place and destroy sin and evil; that right may triumph, the good may live and tyranny be uprooted from the land.' Gobind realised that in order to raise a body of warriors from the peaceful followers of Nanak, he had not only to teach them the use of arms but also to convince them of the morality of the use of force. 'When all other means have failed, it is righteous to draw the sword', he said. 'Light your understanding as a lamp and sweep away the filth of timidity.' With this mission he set about earnestly to 'teach the sparrow how to hunt the hawk and one man have courage to fight a legion'.

On the 1st of Baisakh (13 April) 1699 the young Guru assembled his Sikhs at Anandpur (not far from the present site of the Bhakra Dam). He baptised five of them known as the *Punj Piyaras* or the Five Beloved, as members of a fighting fraternity which he named the Khalsa or the pure. He made the five, who came from different Hindu castes, drink *amrit* (nectar) out of a common bowl, having stirred it with a double-edged dagger while hymns were chanted. He gave them a new surname 'Singh' (lion) to be attached to their first names. He made them take an oath to observe the five Ks, namely, to wear the hair and beard unshorn (*kesh*); to carry a comb (*kangha*) in the hair to keep it tidy; to wear a pair of shorts (*kuchha*) worn by soldiers of the time; to wear a steel bangle (*kara*) on the right wrist as the symbol of poverty and pledge to their Guru; and always to carry a sabre (*kirpan*) on their person. The Khalsa were also enjoined to observe four *rahats* or rules of conduct: not to cut any hair on their body (this was a repetition of the earlier oath); not to eat meat slaughtered in the Muslim fashion, *halaal*, by which an animal was bled to death, but only *jhatka* meat of an animal which had been slaughtered outright with one blow; not to smoke or chew tobacco or take alcoholic beverage; and to refrain from carnal knowledge of Muslim women, so that while fighting the Mughal armies the Sikhs would respect the person of their enemy's womenfolk. After baptising the five, Gobind was in his turn baptised by them. At the end of the ceremony they hailed each other with the new greeting '*Wah Guruji ka Khalsa—Wah Guruji ki Fateh*'—'The Khalsa are the chosen of God, Victory be to God'.

Many explanations have been offered of the ceremony of baptism. Making people of different castes drink *amrit* out of a common bowl was to break through the orthodox Hindu practice of regarding food and drink touched by a person of a lower caste as polluted. The bestowing of the surname 'Singh' on all men—a name current among Hindu martial classes—was a step in the same

direction. A person's caste could be found out from his surname. With a standard surname the Singhs became one family. Sikh women were similarly given the common suffix 'Kaur' (princess).

The distinctive outward features of the Khalsa religion are the unshorn hair and the beard. Wearing long hair and a beard has been a tradition among Indian ascetics. By making this obligatory, Guru Gobind Singh intended to emphasise the ideal of ascetic saintliness and to raise an army of *Sant-Sipaahis* (soldier-saints).

Guru Gobind Singh gave final form to the Sikh faith. He declared the institution of guruship at an end. He had the hymns of his father incorporated in the Granth Sahib and declared that after him the Sikhs were to look upon the sacred book as their guide, as the symbolic representative of all the ten Gurus. Although he was a prolific writer himself, he did not insert any of his compositions in it. His writings are collectively known as the *Dasam Granth*—the Book of the Tenth Guru—and though read with respect, are not accorded the same status as the Granth Sahib. Thus the creed of the Sikhs remained the pacifist one of Nanak and the Gurus whose writings appear in the holy book, whereas the practice of the Khalsa became the martial traditions of Guru Gobind with their justification in the stirring message of the many lines of the *Dasam Granth*. Those who did not accept the changes brought about by Guru Gobind Singh began thereafter to be described as Sahaj Dhari—those who take time to accept the new faith or those who 'take it easy'. Millions of Punjabi Hindus and Sindhis, particularly Amils, count themselves as Sahaj Dhari Sikhs.

Guru Gobind Singh had started preparing for his military career some time before the first ceremony of baptism at Anandpur in 1699. He built a chain of forts and garrisoned them with Pathan mercenaries and his own soldiers. He also fought many battles with the neighbouring rajas. These activities attracted the attention of the Muslim rulers. In 1701 the governors of Sirhind and Lahore besieged the fort of Anandpur. The fort fell after three years of bitter fighting. The Guru escaped but his mother and two of his younger sons were captured. The boys, aged nine and ten, were executed by the order of the Governor of Sirhind. The Guru's mother died of grief. At Chamkaur the Guru was once more surrounded by the Mughal armies. Many of his most devoted followers as well as his two remaining sons fell. 'What does it matter if four be dead, a thousand others live to fight', wrote Gobind. The Guru disguised himself as a Muslim fakeer and slipped through the enemy cordon. The Mughals were in hot pursuit once more. At Muktsar near Ferozepur he suddenly turned on his pursuers, smashed their advance forces and once again continued his flight. He passed within bowshot of Delhi and went south to the Deccan to join the new Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah, who had asked for assistance against his brothers.

Guru Gobind Singh's military career was not marked by any spectacular victories. Apart from winning a few minor skirmishes, in which he defeated the hill chieftains, it was a long series of desperate battles fought against heavy odds. What he succeeded in doing was to 'teach the sparrow to hunt the hawk and one man fight a legion'. The men who followed him were humble farmers and timid tradesmen who, before this venture, were known to be stricken with terror at

the very sight of Afghan and Pathan tribesmen. Neither defeat nor adversity shook the Guru's resolve to carry through his crusade to destroy the oppressive Mughals. His faith in his ultimate victory remained unshaken. Once Emperor Aurangzeb, in the belief that having lost his sons and having been driven from pillar to post, the Guru would be willing to make terms, summoned him to Delhi. The Guru answered the summons by a long composition in Persian, the *Zafarnama—The Epistle of Victory*. He listed many of the misdeeds of the Mughals and added a note of defiance: 'What use is it to put out a few sparks and raise a mighty flame instead?'

Guru Gobind's last days were spent in the Deccan with Emperor Bahadur Shah who had succeeded Aurangzeb on the throne of Delhi and was more friendly towards him. While halting at a small town called Nanded, the Guru was murdered by one of his own Muslim retainers.

Guru Gobind Singh did not leave his followers a kingdom but he laid the foundations of Sikh military might by setting up a tradition of reckless valour which became a distinguishing feature of Sikh soldiery. They came to believe in the triumph of their cause as an article of faith, and like their Guru asked for no nobler end than death on the battlefield:

With clasped hands this boon I crave;
When time comes to end my life
Let me fall in mighty strife.

What do Sikhs Believe in?

One God

Sikhs are monotheists and believe that there is only one God who is beyond time and beyond the circle of birth, death and rebirth. He is immortal, omniscent and omnipresent. He can neither be concretised into a stone idol, nor be represented as superhuman; He is the abstract principle of Truth. This is stated very clearly in the opening lines of the morning prayer *japji* composed by Guru Nanak and known as *mool mantra*—the root belief—of Sikhism.

There is one God
He is the supreme Truth.
He, the Creator,
Is without fear and without hate.
He, the omnipresent
Pervades the universe.
He is not born,
Nor does He die to be born again.

Before Time itself
There was Truth.
When Time began to run its course,
He was the Truth.

Even now, He is the Truth;
Evermore shall Truth prevail.

The firm belief in the unity of God is repeated in the writings of the other Gurus. The Sikhs use both Hindu and Muslim names for God, e.g. Rama, Hari, Govind, Murari as well as Rabb and Rahim. But the name of God most current amongst the Sikhs is *Wah Guru*, the Great Guru or literally 'Wondrous Teacher'.

Sikhism maintains that God has no form or substance and is strongly opposed to the worship of idols. The third Guru, Amar Das, wrote:

They who worship strange gods
Cursed shall be their lives, cursed their habitations.
Poison shall be their food—each morsel,
Poisoned too shall be their garments.
In life for them is misery,
In life hereafter, hell.

Guru Gobind Singh criticised all forms of fetish worship:

Some worship stones and on their heads they bear them.
Some the phallus—strung in necklaces wear its emblem.
Some behold their god in the south, some to the west
bow their heads.
Some worship images, others are busy praying to the dead.
The world is thus bound in false ritual
And God's secret is still unread.

There are no rivers, mountains or places held sacred by the Sikh faith. 'To worship an image, to make a pilgrimage to a shrine, to remain in a desert, and yet have the heart impure is all in vain', said Nanak. Although no places are sanctified by the Sikh faith, Sikhs do go on pilgrimage to temples associated with their Gurus and large gatherings take place on their birthdays or death anniversaries.

Despite maintaining that God has no form nor substance and is beyond human comprehension, Sikhism believes that human beings can reach Him by observing His commandments and by righteous living. This is stated by Guru Nanak in the first verse of his morning prayer:

Not by thought alone
Can He be known,
Though one thinkst a hundred thousand times.
Not in solemn silence,
Nor in deep meditation.
Though fasting yields an abundance of virtue,
It cannot appease the hunger for Truth.

No, by none of these
Nor by a hundred thousand other devices
Can God be reached.
How then shall Truth be known?
How the veil of false illusion torn?
O Nanak: thus runneth the writ divine,
The righteous path let it be thine.

There is no fatalism nor any passive acceptance of a predestined future in the Sikh religion. 'With your own hands carve out your destiny', Nanak said. Belief in action as a way of living and as a means of salvation is a distinctive feature of Sikhism. Nanak, revelling in rural similes, wrote:

As a team of oxen are we driven
By the ploughman, our teacher.
By the furrows made are thus writ
Our actions—on the earth, our paper.
The sweat of labour is as beads
Falling by the ploughman as seeds sown.
We reap according to our measure
Some for ourselves to keep, some to others give.
O Nanak, this is the way to truly live.

Sikhism accepts the Hindu theory of Karma and the transmigration of souls from one form of life to another until their ultimate union with God. The only distinction is one of emphasis on the role of human conduct in escaping from the vicious cycle of life, death and rebirth. The Sikhs believe that the highest form of life is the human and that the time to break the cycles of transmigrations is when one is born in human form. 'Thou hast been granted human form', said Guru Arjun, 'now is the time to meet God!' It is the actions performed during one's human incarnation which determines whether one is condemned to go through the 8,400,000 forms of life (a conventional figure) or attain salvation by the fusion of one's light with the light of God. Nanak wrote:

He who made the night and day,
The days of the week and the seasons,
He who made the breezes blow, the waters run,
The fires and the lower regions.
Made the earth—the temple of law.

He who made creatures of diverse kind
With a multitude of names,
Made this law—
By thought and deed be judged forsooth
For God is true and dispenses Truth.

There the elect His court adorn,
And God Himself their actions honours;
There are sorted deeds that were done and bore fruit
From those that to action could never ripen.
This, O Nanak, shall hereafter happen.

Prayer is an integral part of righteous conduct and there is great emphasis in Sikh religion on *Naam Japana*—repeating the Name. Religious Sikhs spend a lot of time reciting the hymns of the Granth Sahib. They also listen regularly to *keertan* (singing of hymns) by professional singers at *gurdwaras* morning and evening. At other times they repeat the name of God to the beads of the rosary. The most popular chant is *Satnaam, Wah Guru*—'The True Name, the Wondrous Guru'. The repetition of the name of the Guru purifies the mind of impious thoughts and cleanses the soul of sin. Nanak wrote:

As hands or feet besmirched with slime,
Water washes white;
As garments dark with grime,
Rinsed with soap are made light;
So when sin soils the soul
Prayer alone shall make it whole.
Words do not the saint or sinner make.
Action alone is written in the book of fate,
What we sow that alone we take;
O Nanak, be saved or forever transmigrate.

The Guru

Sikhs believe in the necessity of a Guru to show the right path to his disciples. 'On meeting the Guru doubts are dispelled and wanderings of the mind restrained', said Nanak. The ten Gurus are now represented by the Granth Sahib. It is to this sacred book that Sikhs must turn for guidance; it is their only Guru. Nevertheless the practice of seeking advice from and spiritual solace in the company of holy men (*saadh-sangat*) is very common.

The Sikhs do not believe that their Gurus were the incarnations of God. The Gurus themselves said that they were human and were not to be worshipped. 'I came in the course of nature and according to God's order I will depart', said Nanak. Guru Gobind Singh, who initiated much of the ritual practised by the Khalsa was aware of the danger of having divinity imposed on him. He explained his mission in the following words:

For though my thoughts were lost in prayer
At the feet of Almighty God,
I was ordained to establish a sect and lay down its rules.
But whosoever regards me as Lord

Shall be damned and destroyed.
I am—and of this let there be no doubt—
I am but the slave of God as other men are,
A beholder of the wonders of creation.

Guru Gobind Singh was equally emphatic in refuting the claims to divinity made by others:

God has neither friends nor enemies
He needs no hallelujahs nor cares about curses.
Being the first and timeless
How could He manifest Himself through those
Who are born and die?

Not only do the Sikhs recognise no living person as the Guru, they do not invest the priestly profession with any particular social or religious status. There are no religious heads of the community and all adults, male or female, are competent to perform all religious ceremonies. A class of professional readers of the Granth (hence called *granthis*) and singers (*raagis*) exist in bigger towns and cities where large congregations make their service necessary.

The Granth Sahib

The Granth Sahib, compiled by the fifth Guru, Arjun, is also called the Adi (first) Granth, to distinguish it from the works of Guru Gobind Singh, known as the *Dasam Granth*. The Granth Sahib is a unique religious document. It is perhaps the only scripture in the world which incorporates and sanctifies the writings of people who did not subscribe to the faith. In that sense it is the only non-denominational scripture that exists. It has preserved without embellishment or misconstruction the original writings of religious men and poets and saved them from the vagaries of human memory.

The Granth is an enormous book with over 6,000 verses. The language is largely that used by teachers of religions all over India at that time. This Santbhasha, as it was called, is strongly flavoured with the Punjabi of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The hymns are not arranged in any logical order or according to subject-matter but according to ragas or measures of classical Indian music, as they are meant to be sung.

The Granth Sahib is the only object of Sikh worship. In all temples and most well-to-do homes the Granth is read every day. On special occasions it is read non-stop from cover to cover by relays of readers. This takes two days and nights and is known as the *akhand path* (unbroken prayer). A seven-day reading is known as the *saptah path* and is usually undertaken in private homes when assistance from outsiders is not available.

Despite the sanctity given to the Granth, it is not meant to be treated like an idol in a Hindu temple or the figures of Christ and Virgin Mary in a Catholic

church. It is the source and not the object of prayer. The Sikhs revere it because it contains the writings of their Gurus and other saints they hold in esteem. To them it is more a book of divine wisdom than the word of God.

The Sangat

As in the Buddhist concept of *Sangha*, the community is given special status by the Sikh faith and tradition. The Gurus strongly condemned the Hindu caste system which divided society into different sections and excluded the untouchables from its benefits. To the Sikhs, society represented by the congregation (*sangat*) is the law-giver. A resolution passed by the elected representatives of the community becomes a *gurumata*—an order of the Guru.

The Granth Sahib abounds with verses condemning the caste system. Said Nanak:

> There are ignoble amongst the noblest
> And pure amongst the despised.
> The former shalt thou avoid,
> And be the dust under the foot of the other.

The second Guru, Angad, said:

> The Hindus say there are four castes;
> But they are all of one seed.
> Its like clay of which pots are made
> In diverse shapes and forms—yet the clay is the same.
> So are the bodies of men made of five elements.
> How can one amongst them be high and another low?

Most of the Gurus befriended Muslims (who were considered by Hindus to be beyond the pale) and had associates from all castes of the Hindus. The last Guru, Gobind, made strenuous efforts to wipe out caste distinctions from amongst his followers. He said he would mix the four castes just as vendors of betel-leaves mix its ingredients and make them one.

Not only did the Gurus disapprove of segregation imposed by the caste system, they also made no compromise with practices springing from it. The sanctity of the kitchen and food was an important aspect of caste practices which the Hindus tried to pass off under the garb of hygiene. In an oft-quoted and beautiful passage, Nanak said:

> Once we say: 'This is pure, this unclean',
> See that in all things there is life unseen.
> There are worms in wood and cow-dung cakes,
> There is life in the corn ground into bread,

There is life in the water which makes it green,
How then be clean when impurity is over the kitchen spread?
Impurity of the heart is greed,
Of tongue, untruth.
Another's wealth, his wife, her comeliness.
Impurity of the ears is listening to calumny.

Sikhism's crusade against the caste system has however, been only partially successful. Although all Sikhs have access to the *gurdwaras* (where they sit together, and on festivals eat together), in villages, Sikh Harijan castes (Mazhbis) still suffer from discrimination. Amongst the 'upper' castes, there is little or no distinction except when it comes to arranging marriages. The 'caste system' current today divides Sikhs into three: agriculturists (Jats), non-agriculturists, and Harijans. This division though based on birth is not as vicious as the Hindu caste system.

The Hindu practice of renouncing the world to go and dwell in the wilderness (*vanaprastha*) did not find merit in the eyes of the Gurus. They also did not approve of asceticism, celibacy or subjecting the body to penance. All the Gurus led normal family lives and discharged the obligations of husbands and fathers. For them the concept of righteous living had no meaning except in the context of living in a community. Their ideal was to achieve saintliness while remaining within the fold of society—*raj me jog*—to be in the world but not worldly. Nanak wrote:

The lotus in the water is not wet
Nor the waterfowl in the stream.
If man would live, but by the world untouched,
Meditate and repeat the name of the Lord Supreme.

Guru Gobind Singh was more forthright in denouncing asceticism. To him a yogi doing penance by standing on the leg was like the crane which kept one eye shut as if in prayer and the other on the lookout for frogs. He also criticised the making of food fads, such as vegetarianism, a part of religion. 'Practice asceticism in this way', he said,

Let thine own house be the forest,
Thy heart the anchorite.
Eat little, sleep little.
Learn to love, be merciful and forbear.
Be mild, be patient.
Have neither lust, nor anger,
Neither greed nor obstinacy.

The faith of Guru Nanak and the first five Gurus was strictly pacifist. Since their writings form the bulk of the Sikh scriptures it can be maintained that the

religion of the Sikhs is one of peace and humility. With the execution of the fifth and the ninth Gurus, and the savage persecutions that followed, Sikh practice began to change from that of turning the other cheek to that of returning blow for blow. Guru Gobind Singh gave this change its philosophical justification: 'When all other means have failed it is righteous to draw the sword.'

How the Sikhs became Rulers of the Punjab

While Guru Gobind Singh was in the Deccan he met a Hindu hermit called Lachman Das who became his follower. The Guru baptised him and gave him a new name, Banda Singh Bahadur. He invested Banda with the leadership of the Khalsa. Banda left the Deccan, came to the Punjab and issued a call to arms to the Sikhs. Thirsting for revenge ever since the assassination of their Guru and the murder of his infant children, Sikhs flocked to Banda's banner. Led by him they overran the south-eastern districts and captured Sirhind (1710). They razed the town to the ground and put its population along with its Governor (who had ordered the execution of the Guru's sons) to the sword. From there they marched northwards to Ludhiana, Jullundur, Hoshiarpur and Pathankot; then south-eastwards to Karnal and across the river Yamuna to Saharanpur. Everywhere they routed the Mughals, slew officials and ransacked towns. Within a couple of years Banda became master of most of the Punjab.

The Muslims of northern India were thoroughly alarmed by this eruption and called for a holy war (*Jihaad*) to exterminate the Sikhs. Emperor Bahadur Shah abandoned his battles against the Rajputs and the Marathas and returned to his capital. He issued a decree outlawing the Sikh community. (All non-Muslims employed in the Imperial service were ordered to shave their beards). Mughal armies moved into the Punjab from either side. Banda discreetly retired to the hills. But as soon as Bahadur Shah and his Governor withdrew, Banda reoccupied most of southern Punjab.

The hand of fate turned against Banda. Bahadur Shah was succeeded by Farrukhsiyar who ordered the governors of Lahore and Jammu to proceed against the Khalsa leader. Banda was deserted by a large section of the Sikhs who suspected that he was trying to become the eleventh Guru. The Mughals surrounded Banda's forces and starved him into surrender. He, his family and several hundreds of his soldiers were led in chains to Delhi. There they were subjected to inhuman tortures and then publicly beheaded. On 9 June 1716 came the turn of Banda. He was forced to kill his infant son and was then beheaded in Mehrauli.

For some years after the death of Banda the fortunes of the Sikhs remained at a low ebb. Muslim governors of Punjab were determined to wipe out the Sikhs and ordered the immediate execution of anyone who wore his hair and beard unshorn. A contemporary Persian chronicler records that the extensive plain of the Punjab was filled with blood as if it had been a dish. The Harimandir in Amritsar was blown up and thousands of men, women and children butchered. The Sikhs fled the plains and bided their time in the Himalayan foothills.

At last the tide turned in favour of the Sikhs. The authority of the Mughal Government was weakened by the revolt of the Jat tribes around Delhi and by the incursions of the Marathas from the south. This was followed by the invasion of Nadir Shah in 1738 which crippled the Delhi Government and reduced it to shambles. Then came a series of invasions by Ahmed Shah Abdali between 1748 and 1768. Nadir Shah and Abdali not only dealt mortal blows to the Mughals but also destroyed the power of the Jats and Marathas. What was perhaps more important for the Sikhs, they reduced the Muslim governors of the Punjab to impotence. The Sikhs kept out of the way of the invaders and were content to harass their retreating forces by relieving them of their loot and freeing the Hindu captives they were taking with them. Nadir Shah was impressed by their fighting qualities. He saw Sikh horsemen emerge from the jungle, discharge their muskets and vanish before his troops could even load their guns. He asked the Governor of the Punjab about them. 'Their homes are their saddles', replied the Governor. 'They are fakeers who visit their Guru's tank twice a year, bathe in it, and disappear.' Nadir Shah warned him: 'Take care, the day is not distant when these rebels will take possession of your country.'

Nadir Shah was not wrong. Sikh attacks on Abdali's troops became more daring. Three times they occupied the city of Lahore while Abdali was busy elsewhere. Abdali turned on them in fury. On 5 February 1762 he surprised Sikh forces at Malerkotla and killed over 20,000. The defeat is still remembered bitterly as the *Wadda Ghallughara* or the great massacre. However this was not enough to destroy the Sikhs. A few months after the *Wadda Ghallughara* they defeated the Afghans near Amritsar and once more occupied southern Punjab. Two years later Abdali descended on them again. This time the Sikhs faced him in open combat near their sacred city and forced him to retreat. On his last invasion of India in 1768, they harried his troops right up to Peshawar and occupied northern Punjab as well. It was said that fighting the Sikhs was like slashing a sword through water.

One of the reasons for the rapid growth of Sikh power was the emergence of a band of remarkable leaders who built a unique military organisation. The most outstanding of these men were Nawab Kapur Singh, Jassa Singh Ahluwalia and Jassa Singh Ramgarhia. Kapur Singh realised that the nature of their operations against the Mughals and the invaders from the north-west, required the break-up of their forces into several independent commands each with its own spheres of operation. Hence were born the twelve *misls* or militias. Their strength varied from 20,000 horsemen of the most powerful, the Bhangis, to a few hundred of the smaller ones. In the beginning the *misls* were a military brotherhood of a popular democratic type. Every soldier had a voice in the deliberations and shared the booty equally with his officers. Twice a year, on the *Baisakhi* festival in spring and at *Diwali* in autumn, there was a general assembly of the *Sarbat Khalsa* at Amritsar where past successes and failures were discussed and future plans made. The Sikhs not only engaged the Mughals and Afghans in fighting, they also began to consolidate their hold on the outlying districts by building a chain of forts and levying revenue from towns and villages they took under their protection. After the death of Nawab Kapur Singh, the leadership of the *misls* passed to Jassa Singh Ahluwalia. Jassa Singh

felt strong enough to take Lahore and make it his capital. Under him, the power of the Sikhs spread from the banks of the Indus in the west to the Ganges in the east, and from the Himalayas in the north to the desert wastes of Sind in the south. It was with understandable pride that coins were struck in the name of the *misl* confederacy. The inscription on them read:

> By the grace of God and the Sword to Victory
> Thus was ordained by Nanak and Guru Gobind.

The *misls* did not retain their democratic character for long. As soon as the Sikhs dispossessed the Mughals and became landowners themselves, leadership became hereditary. It was at this time that the Phulkian house which later produced the ruling Sikh families of the Punjab—Patiala, Nabha, Jind, Faridkot and Kalsia—was founded. Likewise Jassa Singh Ahluwalia's descendants became rulers of Kapurthala. And as soon as they were possessed of lands and property they began to fight among themselves. It was left to Ranjit Singh to abolish the *misl* system by absorbing them and forming a powerful and united Sikh kingdom.

The Sikh Kingdom of Ranjit Singh

Ranjit Singh is the most important figure in Sikh history and next to Guru Gobind Singh, the Sikh's most venerated warrior. His father was killed in battle when Ranjit was only ten years old. The territories he acquired by inheritance and by marriage were administered in his name by his mother-in-law, Sada Kaur, a very able and astute woman. By the time he was seventeen, Ranjit Singh took over the administration of his estates in his own hands.

Ranjit Singh was an ambitious man with a clear vision of what he was after and the daring to grab every opportunity that came his way. He left his home town, Gujranwala, in July 1799, captured Lahore and made it his Capital. He assumed the leadership of the Sarbat Khalsa and set the seal on his new-won authority by capturing Amritsar in 1802. It was he who rebuilt the Harimandir in marble and covered its dome with gold leaf. An inscription to that effect exists above the entrance to the sanctum sanctorum. Gradually Ranjit Singh extended his domains till the entire region between the Indus and the Sutlej came under his sway. He wanted to go beyond the Sutlej to the Jamuna to bring the remaining Sikh states under his control but was checkmated by the English. Knowing his limitations, Ranjit Singh abandoned his designs to expand eastwards and signed a treaty of friendship with the English in 1809.

Ranjit Singh gave top priority to modernising his army. He recruited the best fighting men available without consideration of religion or caste. His new army had Gurkhas, Biharis, Oriyas, Punjabi Mussulmans, Pathans as well as Sikhs. He set up iron foundaries in Lahore to make cannon and cannon-balls and trained a body of Mussulman gunners to man them. He hired nearly a hundred foreigners—French, Italian, German, Irish and Greek—to drill his troops. However, he did not

put much faith in the loyalties of foreigners. 'German, French or English', he said, 'all these European *haramzaadas* (bastards) are alike.' In the Anglo-Sikh wars which took place only ten years after his death, not one of the foreign officers in the employ of the Sikh court fought on the side of the Sikhs; many offered their services to the British. The generals who led his armies in the campaigns were all Punjabis: Mohkam Chand, Diwan Chand, Fateh Singh Ahluwalia, Hari Singh Nalwa, Akali Phoola Singh and Colonel Shaikh Basawan. Along with these men, Ranjit Singh had others whose advice he sought in matters of state. Fakir Azizuddin and his two brothers became his chief advisers on diplomatic affairs; Raja Dina Nath took over administrative and revenue matters.

Ranjit Singh did not have to wait very long for an opportunity to put his reorganised army in the field. Shah Shuja, the ruler of Afghanistan, was ejected from Kabul and came to Ranjit Singh for help. Before Ranjit could come to his aid, Shuja was taken prisoner and sent to Kashmir. Ranjit's armies rescued Shuja and defeated his enemies at Attcok. Shuja had to yield the Koh-i-noor diamond to Ranjit Singh. In 1818 Ranjit Singh captured Multan and the neighbouring districts. The next year he annexed the whole of Kashmir to his kingdom. Four years later the tribes of the frontier rose in a religious war against the Sikhs. Ranjit's armies decimated the Afghan and Pathan forces and the whole of the North-West Frontier Province right up to the Khyber Pass passed into his control.

Ranjit Singh's ambition to take Sind was frustrated by the English who took the Amirs under their 'protection'. The only direction in which Ranjit Singh could expand was the north, against the Pathans and the Afghans. For some time he seriously considered invading Afghanistan. This did not suit the English. As had happened before, they were a step ahead of the Sikh ruler. They entered into negotiations with Shah Shuja and 'persuaded' Ranjit Singh to back the Shah's claim to his throne. Ranjit Singh gave in and in July 1838 put his signature to a treaty which finally defined the limits of the one frontier which had been left undefined. A year later (1839) he was dead.

Ranjit Singh is the most popular hero of Sikh history. What Prithviraj Chauhan and Rana Pratap are to the Rajputs, what Sivaji is to the Marathas and Napoleon Bonaparte to the French—Ranjit Singh is to the Sikhs. His earlier years showed little promise of greatness and the elements seem to have conspired against him. He was stricken with smallpox which deprived him of one eye. He was small, dark and ugly. Deprived of the discipline of a father's authority he dissipated his youth. (The love of wine, women and horses remained with him to the last.) But at the same time he responded to the Punjabis' call to lead them to fulfil their historic destiny. He liquidated the warring *misls* and united them into the Khalsa brotherhood. He expanded the basis of his state from a religious to a secular one, giving positions of trust and power in civil and military matters to Muslims and Hindus without any distinction. He raised India's most powerful fighting force and for the first time in two thousand years of the history of Hindustan turned the tide of invasion and brought the traditional conquerors of India, the Pathans and Afghans, to their knees. These achievements were enough to endear him to the hearts of all Indians. To add to these was Ranjit Singh's lovable

character. Even at the height of his power he did not lose the common touch. This gave the peasant folk, from whom he had risen, a sense of kinship with him. In the gaudy pomp and splendour of his court, he lived a life of simplicity, always dressed in plain white clothes. He was courteous in speech and utterly humble in his dealings with men of religion. He was known to step down from his throne to wipe the dust off the feet of Muslim fakeers with his long grey beard. He did not mind soldiers who had fought with him taking liberties with him and being rude and familiar. It is said that once when he was riding in procession on his biggest elephant, Akali Phoola Singh shouted at him from a balcony, 'O thou one-eyed one, where did you buy that he-buffalo you are riding?' The King joined his palms and replied with great humility, 'Maharaj, it is one of the gifts granted by you.'

There are many other anecdotes told of his total lack of arrogance. He was a stern but kind ruler. Despite his many conquests, he did not allow wanton destruction of life or property. Throughout his life he never passed a sentence of death.

Many times Ranjit Singh led his armies to battle, fought in the forefront and risked his life like any common soldier. Although he took liberties with his own life, he took no chances when the security of the State was involved. He was single-minded in his pursuit of setting up a powerful Sikh kingdom. He used every weapon in his armoury—craft, cunning, diplomacy, bullying, humility and compromise—to achieve this end. A well-known anecdote gives a clue to his character and the reason for his success. It is said that his favourite Muslim courtesan, Bibi Mohran, after whom he had a coin struck jibed at his ugliness and asked, 'Where were you when God was doling out good looks?' The monarch replied with complete presence of mind, 'I was busy seeking power.'

How the Sikhs Lost their Kingdom

The death of Ranjit Singh was virtually the death of the Sikh kingdom. The revenue and judicial system began to crack up. Taxes were not collected in time and the pay of the civil and military personnel fell in arrears. The army which Ranjit Singh had built into a first class fighting force became like a monster unleashed. Many Europeans fled the country and Punjabi officers were reduced to drill-masters without any authority over their men. Control passed to the *panchs* elected by the soldiers who bargained for conditions of service with their officers. To cap this state of chaos, rival factions sought to put up their own nominees on the throne. Within four years three rulers, Kharak Singh, his son Naunihal Singh, and Sher Singh ascended the throne and were murdered along with their supporters and members of their families including women and children. In 1842 the last Sikh ruler, the six year old Dalip Singh, the youngest son of Ranjit, ascended the throne with his mother, Rani Jindan, as regent. The sanguine drama of murder and reprisal continued behind the palace walls. The army grew in numbers till it had trebled itself—but without direction or discipline of any sort.

The English knew that the Sikh kingdom was ready to fall. All it needed was a little shaking.

The British had for a long time coveted the Sikh kingdom. Ranjit Singh had frustrated their design. He could match their wiles as his army could match theirs in strength. At the time of his death the British had suffered serious reverses in Afghanistan and had neither the power nor the excuse to move against the Sikhs. Within five years the situation had changed and the British again became aggressive. They raised the strength of their army on the Punjab frontier from 2,500 men to 8,000; then from 8,000 to 14,000, and finally to 32,000 men with 68 guns. A strong line of reserves was also built up at Meerut and the cantonments at Ferozepur, Ambala, Kasauli and Simla were heavily garrisoned. In the summer of 1845, 70 thirty-ton boats built in Bombay were brought up the Sutlej and training in bridge-building started under the very noses of the Sikh soldiers guarding the frontier on the other side. Then the Governor-General, Sir Henry Hardinge himself came to the Punjab to plan the campaign with his Commander-in-Chief, Lord Gough.

The location of the pontoon bridge left no doubt in the minds of the Sikhs where the British army would strike. The Sikhs decided that if the British wanted war, they would have it in their own territory. On 11 December 1845 the Sikh army forded the river a few miles above Ferozepur and took their positions for battle.

The British had everyone in the Punjab on their side except common soldiers of the Khalsa army. The court, including Rani Jindan, were anxious to come to terms with them if their possessions were guaranteed. The Chief Minister, the Commander-in-Chief and most of the senior officers, had assured them of cooperation. The fight put up by the leaderless rank and file of Ranjit Singh's army surprised both the British army and the traitorous Sikh ruling classes. They mauled the British at Mudki. For the next three days, the Sikhs waited for reinforcements promised by their commanders to finish off the English army. Reinforcements were deliberately held back. Instead of gun-powder, sackloads of sand and rape-seed were sent. The British who had received reinforcements defeated the Sikhs at Ferozeshahr. Two more engagements were fought, one at Aliwal and the other at Sabraon, where the Sikhs were completely routed.

By the treaty of surrender signed at Lahore in March 1846, nearly half of the kingdom was taken over by the British who at the same time sold Jammu and Kashmir for a paltry sum to Gulab Singh, a Dogra courtier of Ranjit Singh. Young Dalip Singh was taken under protection and ordered to hand over the Koh-i-noor diamond. A British Resident was installed in Lahore with an army of his own. Lord Hardinge wrote: 'We must bear in mind that, by the Treaty of Lahore, the Punjab was never intended to be an independent State.... In fact the native prince is in fetters, under our protection and must do our bidding.'

At long last it dawned upon Rani Jindan and her sycophantic ministers that they had been duped by the British. It was too late to undo the effect of their treachery. On the British side Lord Dalhousie replaced Lord Hardinge as Governor-General. He believed that the right to annex the Punjab was 'beyond cavil'. He wrote: 'The task before me is the utter destruction and prostration of the Sikh power, the subversion of its dynasty, and the subjection of its people. This must be done promptly, fully and finally.'

The plan to annex was provided by the revolt of the Hindu Governor of Multan. It was an insignificant affair which could have been put down without much exertion. But the British decided to describe it as a Sikh rising so as to have the excuse of annexing what remained of their kingdom. To the surprise of the British a Sikh rising it did become. The British tried to elicit the support of the Mohammedan peasantry by asking them to rise 'in the memory of their murdered parents, friends and relatives' and destroy the Sikhs. The major engagement of this campaign was fought at Chillianwala in February 1849. The Sikh armies once again mauled the English. It was the worst reverse ever suffered by them in their history of empire building in India—and that at the hands of a virtually leaderless army. Once again when the British believed the battle was lost, their friends in the Sikh camp came to their rescue by holding back their fire. The British forces were given time to recoup their strength. At Gujarat, fresh forces entered the battle and turned defeat into victory. On 10 March 1849, the Sikh armies laid down arms. A fortnight later a proclamation was read annexing the Sikh kingdom to the British Crown.

The Sikhs under Pax Britannica

The British had been deeply impressed by the fighting qualities of the Sikhs. Although they disbanded the Punjab army, they offered Khalsa soldiers service in their own. Men who knew no other profession save farming and soldiering joined the British army in large numbers. The Sikh leaders were assured that all men recruited would be obliged to wear their hair and beards unshorn as prescribed by their faith. The British took another step which doubly ensured the loyalties of the Sikh peasantry towards them. While they confiscated large *jagirs*, they handed over the lands to peasant-proprietors who had always been the backbone of the *misl* as well as Ranjit Singh's forces. At the same time Phulkian States: Patiala, Nabha, Jind and Faridkot were confirmed on their estates with ruling powers. So also was Kapurthala.

The Board of Governors of the Punjab had old canals reopened, new roads laid; rail, post and telegraph communications introduced. After years of anarchy peace and prosperity returned to the Punjab. It was not surprising that when most of northern India rose in revolt against the British in 1857, Punjabis remained loyal. The Sikhs had two other reasons for throwing their weight on the side of the English in quelling the uprising. Only ten years earlier the whole of India had furnished troops to the British and helped them to crush an independent Sikh State. There were Biharis, Oriyas, Rajputs and Marathas along with many other Indians fighting on the British side in the Anglo-Sikh wars. The Sikhs could hardly be expected to join their erstwhile enemies. They also did not look upon the uprising as a war of independence. (As indeed it never was until the Indian Government decided to invest it with that status a hundred years later in complete disregard of proven historical facts.) There was no identity of purpose between the Hindu and Muslim mutineers nor between those of Bihar and U.P. and those from Maharashtra. The Marathas wanted back their kingdoms; the Muslims wanted to re-establish Mughal rule and had rallied round the aged Bahadur Shah. The Sikhs

had bitter memories of Mughal rule in the Punjab and its re-establishment could in no sense be looked upon as liberation from foreign rule.

Not all Sikhs, however, accepted British overlordship with good grace. Amongst the most vociferous antagonists was Baba Ram Singh (1815–85) who exhorted his followers to boycott British textiles and wear *khadi* (more than half-a-century before Mahatma Gandhi), have their own postal service and courts. Ram Singh's followers called Kukas or Namdharis clashed with the authorities over the issue of slaughter of cows. Hundreds of Namdharis were captured and blown off from cannons and Ram Singh exiled to Burma. (To this day Namdharis wear white *khadi*. Their style of turban which is flat across the forehead is different from that worn by other Sikhs. Orthodox Sikhs do not approve of the Namdharis regarding Baba Ram Singh and his successors as Gurus.)

In the *Pax Britannica* imposed by the British rulers the Sikhs had to contend with new challenges. The Arya Samaj movement was making rapid strides in the Punjab and claiming large numbers of adherents from among the Sikhs. Christian missions were also gaining converts from the poorer sections of the community. Sikh leaders launched the Singh Sabha to counteract these movements and instil faith in orthodox Khalsa traditions through publication of literature on Sikhism and the opening of schools and colleges. The British Government gave its blessings to this literary-educational movement. The famous Khalsa College of Amritsar was founded in 1893.

On the literary front, the movement was fortunate in having the celebrated poet-philosopher Bhai Vir Singh amongst its leaders. Vir Singh founded the Khalsa Tract Society and the weekly journal *Khalsa Samachar*. The services of Mr Macauliffe were procured and a comprehensive work of many volumes produced in English on the lives and teachings of the Sikh Gurus.

An important innovation introduced by the Singh Sabha in 1908 was the setting up of an education committee to organise annual education conferences in different parts of the country. New Sikh schools and colleges followed in the wake of these conferences.

With the rise of political consciousness, the Singh Sabha, because of its close association with the Government and the upper middle-class nature of its leadership began to lose its popularity with the masses. Its political facet was represented by a body called the Chief Khalsa Diwan. The politics of the Chief Khalsa Diwan were pro-British and indifferent, if not hostile to the nationalist movement.

Sikhs Turn Nationalists

The period of Sikh-British honeymoon came to an end with World War I. It is estimated that in that war a third of the British Indian army was composed of Sikh soldiers. Sikhs also served as policemen in different parts of the British Empire extending from China to the Middle East. Hundreds of pensioners and their families settled in Canada, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, East Africa and the Middle East.

Contacts with the world outside made the emigrants conscious of the absence of political rights in their own country. The American and Canadian governments passed laws to keep Asiatics out of the American continent. Sikh settlers could not believe that the Canadians would discriminate against coloured people from the Empire—particularly those whose loyalty to the British Crown was proverbial. But two waves of emigration, of about 4,000 Sikhs, in the years 1906 and 1907, led the Canadian Government to enact legislation virtually banning Indians from entering their country and expelling those that were there. This came as a rude shock to the Sikhs. They appealed to the Canadian people and to the British Government. They were rebuffed, both in Ottawa and London. Sikhs were insulted in the streets, beaten up by hoodlums and subjected to pogroms organised by white Asian-baiters. They turned to the Indian Government for help. They were told to return to the Punjab. Those who did, were kept under surveillance as having been contaminated by the free world. Out of sheer desperation the emigrants decided to band themselves together and fight for their rights. In March 1913 their representatives organised the Ghadr (mutiny) party with the avowed aim of ousting British rule from India by all available means.

Three months later took place the disgraceful episode of the *Komagata Maru*. This was a Japanese vessel chartered by Sikh emigrants going to Canada. The ship and its passengers satisfied every condition that the Canadian Government had imposed on would-be immigrants. Nevertheless the *Komagata Maru* was held up in Vancouver harbour for two months and its passengers refused permission to disembark. No food or fresh water was allowed to be supplied to the ship. Instead, the Canadian police tried to board it by force to arrest the leaders. When this was frustrated, Canadian warships surrounded the boat and threatened to blow it up. The *Komagata Maru* was forced to turn back with its disillusioned human cargo. When it docked at Budge Budge harbour, near Calcutta, the Indian police tried to force the passengers into a waiting train without consulting them about their destinations. A scuffle ensued. The police opened fire and killed twenty-three men. The rest were put in chains and packed into prisoners' compartments to be taken to the Punjab. Some of them overpowered their guards during the night and jumped off the running train to join other returned emigrants in an attempt to overthrow British rule by acts of terrorism. The attempt was a dismal failure. The bulk of the community was still loyal to the British and was deeply involved in helping it in the war which had broken out a few months earlier. The terrorists were rounded up and tried by specially constituted courts. Many were sent to the gallows. Many more were sentenced to life imprisonment in the Andamans and the jails of the Punjab. Most of them spent their youth and middle age in prison. When they were released, they were old men without any possessions or families and full of bitterness. These old men (known as *babas*) formed the nucleus of the Communist movement in the Punjab.

The Great War (1914–18) witnessed the high water mark of the collaboration between the Sikhs and the British Government. Thousands of young men volunteered to fight and laid down their lives on the German and Turkish fronts. Many more helped with funds and material. It is the estimate of Sir John

Maynard that the contribution of the Sikh community in men and material was ten times that of any of the other communities of India.

When the war ended, the Sikhs, not without reason, expected to be compensated for their services. The Montagu-Chelmsford reforms were a blow to Sikh expectations. The community which had done so much more than any other in the War, which paid 40 per cent of the land revenue of the province and formed 25 per cent of the electorate, was treated with less consideration than other minorities—particularly the Muslims (who, with a population of 10 per cent in Bihar, were given 33 per cent representation). Bewilderment led to bitterness as the story of the treatment of Sikhs in foreign lands and the trials and executions of members of the Ghadr party gained currency. Then came the clash over the control of Sikh shrines. And the community, which in 1918 was reckoned by the British as the most loyal of all in India, became within the short span of four years the most rebellious and took its place in the vanguard of the freedom movement.

The Akalis

The movement that led to the final break of the Sikhs with the Government was the agitation known as the Akali movement, over the possession of their shrines. Sikh *gurdwaras* had always been many other things besides places of worship. They were used as meeting places, schools and rest-houses for travellers. Most of the historic *gurdwaras* were well endowed and not only had the revenues of large tracts of land attached to them but made enormous incomes from offerings. By convention, the priestly duties in most of the well-known *gurdwaras* were performed by *mahants* some of whom belonged to the Udasi order which had not fully accepted the tenets of Guru Gobind Singh. They were inclined to introduce worship of Hindu idols alongside reverence to the Granth. Gradually, the posts of *mahants* became hereditary and from being performers of religious ceremonies they became religious heads owning temples and their fortunes. Some of them were men of loose character and carried on their debauchery within temple precincts. It was natural for the Sikhs to want to preserve their shrines for a purely Sikh form of worship and have some say in the management of incomes to which they contributed. Legal processes proved wholly inadequate for the purpose. Since the *mahants* were in possession and possession was nine points of the law, cases lodged in courts dragged on for as many as twenty years without any result. Then the Sikhs decided to have recourse to direct action by ousting the *mahants* and occupying *gurdwaras* in the name of committees of management set up by them. At first both the *mahants* and the Government realised the justice of the case. Some *gurdwaras* passed peacefully into the hands of committees which reappointed the *mahants* to carry on their priestly functions on a fixed remuneration.

Meanwhile the political situation in the Punjab suddenly deteriorated. The peaceful agitation launched by Mahatma Gandhi took a violent turn and the Government countered it with brutal force. In April 1919 took place the tragic massacre of Jallianwala Bagh where General Dyer fired upon an unlawful (but peaceful) meeting and killed and wounded over 1,500 men, women and children. This was followed by the notorious order compelling all citizens

passing a particular spot where a white nurse had been lynched by the mob to crawl on their bellies. Many of the victims of the firing and the insolent order were Sikhs. In any case, the incidents had taken place in their sacred city and attracted the attention of the entire community. While the rest of the country was still reeling from the shock of Jallianwala, the *mahants* of Sikh temples were protesting their loyalties to the British.

For reasons best known to the Government it suddenly decided to suppress the purely religious agitation of the Akalis. It began to back the *mahants* against the Sikh congregations. The year 1921 saw a series of tragedies. There was a fracas at Taran Taran resulting in a few deaths. A month later the *Mahant* of Nankana Sahib, the birthplace of Guru Nanak, had 130 Sikh worshippers, who had come to take possession of the shrine, butchered by his hirelings. Then the movement was launched in full force. The Government provided the incentive by making a series of false moves and withdrawing under pressure of the agitation. Without any excuse the keys of the Golden Temple treasury were taken away. They were returned after several thousand volunteers had been beaten and arrested. This affair was followed by an order banning the wearing of *kirpans*, which most orthodox Sikhs carried in conformity with their religious practice. Many thousands were arrested for contravening the order, before the order was withdrawn. In the summer of 1922 the biggest passive resistance movement was launched at Guru ka Bagh—a small plot of land attached to a *gurdwara*. The *Mahant* had forbidden the Sikhs from taking timber from the land, as had been their practice, for the use of the kitchen attached to the *gurdwara*. The police, backing the *Mahant*, began to arrest Sikhs for trespass. Batches of hundreds marched in peaceful processions to Guru ka Bagh and were given a merciless thrashing with lathis and arrested. After many months, the land was handed over to the committee of management. Meanwhile, yet another campaign was started at Nabha. The Maharajah who had made no secret of his sympathies with the movement was deposed and sent out of the Punjab. A batch of passive resisters, who marched into the State to offer prayers for the deposed Maharajah, were fired on by the police and forty Sikhs were killed. Amongst the many arrested was Jawaharlal Nehru who had come to see things for himself. The crowning piece of folly had yet to come. When it seemed that the whole thing was over and a Bill to regulate the management of the Sikh shrines was being canvassed, the Government struck once more. One night in the autumn of 1923, fifty-seven leaders of the movement were arrested. They were charged with conspiracy to overthrow British rule in order to set up a Sikh State. The trial went on for three years and all but a few were sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment.

The movement ended in 1925 with the passing of the Sikh Gurdwaras Act and the release of the leaders. In the five years of agitation over 30,000 men and women had gone to jail, nearly 400 had been killed and over 2,000 wounded. Seven hundred village officials were dismissed and over Rs 15 lakhs realised in fines and forfeitures. The political results were even more far-reaching. The British lost forever the support and loyalty of the Sikh community.

In the years between the two World Wars (1918–1939) the Sikhs

finally turned their face against their English rulers. Despite the many inducements offered by the British and the exhortations of leaders like Master Tara Singh, who wished to maintain Sikh representation in the Defence services, when World War II broke out, not many Sikhs volunteered for service. On the contrary, a large proportion of serving men, who went over to the Japanese sponsored Indian National Army raised by 'General' Mohan Singh and later commanded by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, were Sikhs.

When the War ended it was obvious to everyone that the days of British rule in India were numbered. In the impasse between the Congress party which demanded independence for a united India and the Muslim League, which demanded the creation of Pakistan as a condition precedent to the transfer of power, the Sikhs found themselves on the horns of a dilemma. Any partition of the Punjab on the basis of religion would divide the Sikhs into two equal halves. Sociologically, the Sikhs were allied to the Hindus and politically, the vast majority of them to the Indian National Congress. Their resistance to the demand for a division of the country turned to hostility towards supporters of Pakistan. Soon, communal riots broke out over northern India. Starting from Calcutta in August 1946, they spread to East Bengal, Bihar and Punjab and the North-West Frontier Province. When the time came for them to decide whether or not they would accept division of the country, hundreds of Sikh villages in north-western Punjab had been destroyed and looted by Muslim mobs and many thousand refugees had fled for safety to the eastern and southern districts. The Sikhs had no choice but to accept partition. When Pakistan was set up in August 1947, they abandoned their homes, temples, lands, cattle, in fact every material possession they had and fled to India.

Sikh Decimated Homeland

The partition of the Punjab cut the Sikh community into equal halves. Nearly 2.5 million Sikhs poured out of Pakistan into India. These Sikhs had been the most prosperous peasantry of India and had owned rich agricultural lands in canal irrigated colonies. They had to change places with the largely landless Muslim tenantry living in East Punjab. Although they were reduced from affluence to poverty, they found that, for the first time in their history, in certain districts they formed a majority of the population. The existence of an economically disgruntled people in compact areas gave birth to the notion of an autonomous Sikh State.

Princely families which had wielded considerable influence in the affairs of the community before 1947 were eliminated as a political force. Later Pepsu (Patiala and East Punjab States Union) was merged with the Punjab. In Marxist terminology, effective power passed from the feudal overlords to the *petit bourgeois*, i.e. the small peasant proprietor and the petty tradesman.

Independent India declared itself a socialist, secular State. Privileges enjoyed by minorities like the Sikhs were abolished. This hit the Sikhs harder than other minorities. Till 1947, they had enjoyed preferential treatment in the

recruitment to the armed forces and the civil services and special representation in elected bodies. After 1947 they had to compete with other communities on the basis of merit and their representation was gradually reduced to accord with their numbers. Being a Khalsa-Sikh no longer carried any political or economic advantages. Sikhs who observed Khalsa forms and symbols for the economic benefits that accrued, began to give them up.

The abolition of separate electorates and the introduction of joint electorates made the Sikhs, who were a minority in most districts of the Punjab, politically subservient to the Hindu majority. The Sikh communal point of view came to be expressed in purely communal organisations like the S.G.P.C. or in the few areas where they outnumbered the Hindus.

The Indian Constitution recognised 14 major languages including Punjabi. On the principle of having state boundaries drawn on linguistic basis, all languages spoken in compact geographical regions were given administrative units of their own. The only exception was Punjabi. The Sikhs construed this as discrimination against them and began agitating for a Punjabi-speaking State. Two mass civil disobedience movements were launched resulting in the imprisonment of over 50,000 passive resisters. The agitation was suspended owing to the emergency caused by the Chinese invasion in October 1962.

The demand for a Punjabi-speaking State was revived and soon won the support of the vast majority of Sikhs. But once again, because of the war against Pakistan in 1965, the Sikhs had to postpone the demand till the hostilities were over. Most of the battles were fought in the Sikh homeland and by troops which were largely composed of Sikhs. The people of India were thus assured of the Sikhs' loyalties. As soon as the war ended the Government appointed a Commission to demarcate Punjabi-speaking from the Hindi-speaking areas. The Commission gave its findings in the summer of 1966. The Punjabi Suba conceded by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was much smaller than that envisaged by the Sikh leaders or warranted by the facts. The demand for the re-adjustment of the boundaries became a rallying point for the Sikh Akali leaders.

* * *

The Sikhs have never had it so good as they have had since India became independent. Although they lost the richer half of their homeland to Pakistan they were quick to recover from the disaster. They spread all over India and thousands went abroad, mainly to the Middle East, England and Canada. They cleared the Terai's malarial swamps and turned them into rich farms. They irrigated the desert wastes of Rajasthan and made Ganganagar district, where they had settled, the most prosperous region of the State. In their part of the Punjab they increased the average yield of the acre three times or more by introducing scientific, mechanised farming, use of hybrid seeds, chemical fertilisers, insecticides and harvesters. Sikhs rose to the highest positions in the Republic—two became Air Chief Marshalls (Arjan Singh and Dilbagh Singh), and one, General Jagjit Singh Arora, had the honour of

accepting the surrender of Pakistani armies in Bangladesh's war of independence. M.S. Gujral became Chairman of the Railway Board, Dr. Manmohan Singh Governor of the Reserve Bank of India. In 1982 a Sikh, Giani Zail Singh, was elected President of the Republic.

Nevertheless, a section of the community led by the Akalis continued to grumble and accuse the Government of discriminating against them and their State. In 1973 the Akali party passed a resolution in Anandpur setting out various demands, including more autonomy for their State. Implicit in the Anandpur Resolution was the assertion that Sikhs were a nation apart from the Hindus. Not much notice was taken of this resolution till a handful of Sikhs living in England, Canada and the United States of America started a movement demanding a sovereign, independent Sikh State to be known as Khalistan. Even this did not unduly alarm the saner elements in the community till the Akalis were ousted from power in the Punjab in 1980. In sheer frustration the Akalis hauled out the Anandpur Resolution from their archives and presented a list of 45 demands to the Central Government. When no notice was taken of these demands, they launched a passive resistance movement, *dharma yudh*—war of righteousness. Over 150,000 Akalis went to jail and in the numerous confrontations that took place with the police and members of the Nirankari subsect, many lives were lost. From within the ranks of the Akalis emerged an extremist group led by the Dal Khalsa. The Nirankari Guru and an eminent Hindu journalist were slain by these extremists. They also hijacked two Indian Airlines planes. Relations between Hindus and Sikhs, which had always been cordial were soured. An even more inexplicable phenomenon was the rise of fundamentalism among young Sikhs. The leader of Sikh fundamentalists, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, came to the forefront. He had been the head of an obscure Sikh hospice and had restricted his activities to touring Sikh villages baptising thousands of young men and women by exhorting them to return to the spartan traditions of Guru Gobind Singh. The confrontation with the Nirankaris and the prolonged *morcha* made him into a powerful leader with a large following. Perhaps the biggest single blunder committed by the Government was during the Ninth Asiad. In order to prevent Akalis from disrupting the Games, it sanctioned the interrogation by the police of every Sikh coming by road or rail to Delhi. For once the Sikhs felt that the Government of India itself had begun to discriminate against the Sikhs and regard them as a people apart from other Indians. Khalistan, which had till then been dismissed as a fanciful dream of crazed minds started becoming a menacing reality.

The Sikh Way of Life

Nine out of every ten Sikhs live in villages and hamlets, most of them in comfortable homes with expansive courtyards where their cattle are tethered. Families of sons of the same father live under one roof till their land is divided. Almost every Sikh home today has a transistor radio and a fair proportion own television sets as well. The more prosperous amongst them own their own tractors and tube-wells.

A Sikh village invariably has a *gurdwara* which can be recognised from a distance, because of its tall flag-pole draped in yellow and the triangular flag bearing the Sikh emblem consisting of a quoit with a double-edged dagger in the centre and two crossed swords beneath.

Sikh peasants are great eaters. Although not vegetarian, they seldom manage to eat meat except on special occasions like weddings. Then their preference is for goat-meat which they honour with the name *mahaprasad*—the great offering. The Sikhs' staple diet consists of wheat, buffalo milk and milk products like curd, buttermilk and clarified butter (ghee). During the winter months their favourite food is mustard leaf mash (*sarson ka saag*) capped with blobs of fresh home-made butter eaten with whole meal bread of chick-peas (*makkai ki roti*) or *baajra* (millet). All this is washed down with gallons of buttermilk. This diet is both wholesome and nourishing and explains the Sikhs' excellent physique, vitality and stamina. An English dietician, who experimented with diets of different Indian communities by feeding rats on the food eaten by Pathans, Rajputs, Marathas and Gurkhas, found that the 'Sikh rat' was healthier than the rats of other martial communities.

Although alcoholic beverage as well as tobacco are forbidden, most Sikhs observe the taboo against tobacco but ignore it when it comes to liquor. Hard drinking has become a problem in the Sikh peasantry. So also the consumption of opium and hashish (*bhang*) which is the traditional drink of the Nihangs and known to them as *sukkha*—the peace giver.

Sikh Ceremonies

BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD There are no recognised ceremonies connected with the birth of a Sikh child. Among some sections it is customary to recite the first five verses of the morning prayer, *japji*, in the ears of a new-born baby (very much like the Muslim ceremony of whispering the *fatiha*) but the practice is by no means universal.

The naming ceremony is well established. The Granth is opened at random and the child has to be found a name beginning with the first letter of the first word at the top of the page.

Sikhs of north-western Punjab observe certain ceremonies and have feasting when a child's hair is plaited for the first time (*gundana*) just as the Hindus celebrate the first shaving of a child's head (*mundan*). Among some families, a child's initiation in to reading the Granth Sahib (*charni lagana*—attachment to the feet of the Lord) is a matter of elaborate ceremonies at the *gurdwara*, followed by the feeding of the poor; amongst others, a child is introduced to the Granth without any fuss.

KHALSA BAPTISM OR PAHUL When boys and girls attain puberty and are old enough to understand the obligations of their faith, they are baptised. The ritual connected with this ceremony is the same as performed by Guru Gobind Singh at the first baptismal in 1699. It is performed before an assembled congregation. Five orthodox Sikhs are chosen to initiate the new convert. *Amrit* is prepared by mixing sugar in water and stirring it with a *khanda* (double-edged

dagger) to the recitation of selected passages of the scriptures including Guru Gobind Singh's composition, the *Jaap Sahib*. The initiate then takes the vows of the Khalsa faith. Each vow is read out loudly and the initiate signifies his acceptance by bowing before the Granth. Palms full of *amrit* are splashed in his face with the cry '*Bol Sri Wah Guru Ji ka Khalsa, Sri Wah Guru Ji ki Fateh*'.

The *pahul*, like the thread ceremony amongst the Hindus, is looked upon as a new birth and sometimes the baptised person takes on another name. The *pahul* not only imposes obligations of the faith, it also confers certain rights. Thereafter a person has access to the holiest shrine—like the Akal Takht in the Golden Temple at Amritsar where the sacred relics of the Gurus are placed. He or she then also has the right to enter into matrimonry.

MARRIAGE A Sikh marriage is patterned after the Hindu and differs from it only in minor detail. The important difference is that the religious texts which the Sikhs use are not Vedic but from the Granth Sahib. A Sikh wedding is described as *anand karaj*—the ceremony of bliss. The bridegroom leaves his home on horseback, accompanied by his friends and relations (*barat* or *janj*). They arrive at the bride's house in a procession with music. There they are received by the male relatives of the bride (*milni*) and entertained to dinner. The bridegroom is taken indoors and is subjected to much leg pulling by the sisters and friends of the bride. In the case of arranged marriages, this is often the first time the bridal pair see each other.

A Sikh wedding should take place before sunrise. In the early hours of the dawn, professional singers (*raagis*) sing hymns prescribed for morning worship (*asa di war*). When the morning hymns are over, the pair are asked to come and sit in front of the Granth. A priest first tells them of the obligations of married life. Thereafter, he reads the hymns of marriage from the Granth. The *raagis* follow this by singing the words. The bridegroom steps in front, holding one end of a scarf while the bride holds the other end and follows him. The brothers and near male relatives of the bride help her round the Granth, behind her groom. These circumambulations (*laawaan*) round the Granth are repeated four times and the couple are pronounced man and wife.

A few hours after the marriage the bride leaves her parental home (*doli*) with her husband. In many peasant communities, where people are married very young, the marriage ceremony is in effect only one of betrothal and the bride returns to her parents until she attains puberty. The marriage is consummated when she leaves her home for the second time (*muklaawa*).

Although the ceremony of *laawaan* described above is the only one prescribed for Sikhs, amongst the peasantry the custom of taking women—usually widows—under protection by simply casting the mantle (*chaddar*) is prevalent. The children of such unions are recognised as legitimate.

DEATH There is no prescribed ritual on the occasion of death but some hymns have been chosen to be recited when death takes places. The only strict injunction is against lamentation and breast-beating, which is very common in

northern India. The mourners sit around the deceased and recite the morning prayer.

Before being taken for cremation, the corpse is bathed and dressed in the emblems of the faith. The Sikhs cremate their dead and, as with the Hindus, the funeral pyre is lit by the son or nearest male relative. The ashes are thrown into rivers, if possible, in the Beas at Kiratpur. Sikhs are forbidden from erecting memorials to the dead or celebrating death anniversaries at *sradhs*. A period of mourning, varying from 4 to 10 days, depending on the age of the deceased is prescribed during which people come to condole. It is customary to remove all furniture from the house and sit and sleep on the floor. On the last day of mourning friends and relatives assemble in the house to particpate in the singing of hymns and recitation of the Granth Sahib. If the occasion is the death of the head of the household, his eldest son is officially recognised as the new head, by having a turban tied on his head, in front of assembled friends and relatives.

SIKH FESTIVALS Sikhs observe all the festivals celebrated by the Hindus of northern India. They wear yellow on *Basant Panchmi*, the Spring Festival, sprinkle coloured water on *Holi*, assemble for congregrational prayers on *Baisakhi* and light lamps at *Diwali*. Only the religious part of the ceremonial takes place in the *gurdwara*, instead of the Hindu temple. In addition to these, they have a few others of their own. Of these, six are important, viz. the birthdays of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh, the martyrdoms of the fifth Guru, Arjun, the ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur, and the two sons of Gobind; the day of the founding of the Khalsa and *Hola Mohalla* are chiefly celebrated at Anandpur a day after *Holi*.

The usual form is to take out the Granth Sahib in procession through the city. The Holy Book is placed on top of a flower-bedecked van. On either side, two men carry the Sikh ensigns (*Nishan Sahib*). Five men, representing the first five converts, march in front of the van with drawn swords. The women folk walk behind the van. The men group themselves into parties of singers and go in front. With them are the usual paraphernalia of Indian processions: brass bands, pipers, acrobats, wrestlers and sword and stick experts. Another prominent feature of Sikh celebrations is the mass feeding of worshippers at the *Guru ka langar* (the kitchen of the Guru). Sometimes as many as 50,000 people are fed on these occasions.

The Sikh Temple

A Sikh temple is known as a *gurdwara*—the gateway of the Guru. At one time, it was also known as the *dharamsala*—the place of faith. Wherever there is a community of Sikhs, the first thing it does is to build a *gurdwara*. Thus, there are thousands of *gurdwaras* all over India and abroad. You can see them in Japan, Hong Kong, Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, East Africa, England, Canada and the United States. Most well-to-do Sikhs set apart a room in their houses as their private *gurdwaras*.

The central object of worship in the *gurdwara* is the Granth Sahib. The Holy Book is placed on a low cot and draped in cloth, usually of embroidered

silk. Above it is an awning as the emblem of royalty. The Granth Sahib is ceremonially opened every morning and wrapped up and put to rest in the evening. Both men and women read it and while reading they, or somebody standing beside them, wave a fly-whisk made of white yak's hair.

Before entering a *gurdwara* the worshipper has to take off his shoes (in bigger ones, wash his feet as well) and have his or her head covered. People generally avoid stepping on the threshold because the dust of the feet of pilgrims is regarded as too sacred to be trod upon. The worshipper will collect the dust by running the flat of his palms on the threshold and spreading it on his forehead. Then he goes up a gangway leading to the Holy Book, places his offering of money on the cloth draping it, goes down on the knees and makes obeisance by rubbing the forehead on the ground. He then retraces his steps without turning his back on the Granth and joins the congregation—men to the right, women to the left or behind the Holy Book.

Four *gurdwaras* associated with Guru Gobind Singh have been given special sanctity and are known as the four *takhts* (thrones of the Guru). The first is at Patna where he was born; the second at Anandpur where the first ceremony of baptism was performed; the third is the Akal Takht (the throne of the timeless one) in the Golden Temple at Amritsar from where all important edicts issue to the community, and the fourth at Nanded in Hyderabad, Deccan, where the Guru died. In addition, there are other historic *gurdwaras* to which Sikhs go on pilgrimage. Some are associated with Guru Nanak, like his birthplace at Nankana Sahib and the site of his encounter with a Muslim divine at Hasan Abdal where there is a large *gurdwara*. These and nearly 200 others, including the site of the martyrdom of the fifth Guru, Arjun, at Lahore, are now in Pakistan. On the Indian side, the place of the execution of the two younger sons of Guru Gobind Singh at Fatehgarh in Patiala and the site of the imprisonment and martyrdom of the ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur, in Chandni Chowk of Delhi are amongst the most frequented.

New *gurdwaras* spring up every other day. Those connected with the Gurus usually bear their name or the event commemorated. The Harimandir in Amritsar is the holiest of Sikh holy shrines and is usually referred to as Darbar Sahib—the venerable court (of God). The birth place of Guru Nanak at Nankana Sahib (now in Pakistan) is known as Janam Asthan (place of birth) as is the *gurdwara* in Patna where Guru Gobind Singh was born. The site of the martyrdom of Guru Arjun in Lahore (Pakistan) is Dera Sahib—place of staying. There are many *gurdwaras* known as *Chhevin Padshai*—of the Sixth 'Emperor', Guru Hargobind. The *gurdwaras* commemorating the infant Guru Har Rai's stay in Delhi is known as Bangla Sahib—the venerable bungalow, after the mansion of the Jaipur Maharaja whose guest he was. The site of Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom in Chandni Chowk, Delhi, is Sees Ganj—the market of the head; the site of his cremation Rikab Ganj—market of stirrups, from the name of the village where it was situated. The *gurdwara* in Nanded (Maharashtra) where Guru Gobind Singh was assassinated is known as Abchal Nagar—the town of the departure, as well as Hazoor Sahib (the vulnerable Lord).

All historic Sikh *gurdwaras* in the Punjab are controlled by the

S.G.P.C.; those outside the Punjab by locally elected bodies on which the S.G.P.C. is represented. Currently the Akali Dal is agitating for an All India Gurdwaras Act which will bring all Sikh *gurdwaras* under its purview.

What is in a Sikh Name?

Every male Sikh bears the name Singh, as does every female Sikh the name Kaur. However, although all Sikhs are Singhs or Kaurs, all Singhs and Kaurs are not Sikhs. The word Singh means a lion; its female counterpart Kaur means both princess and lioness. Both were common amongst Hindus, notably the martial classes like the Rajputs, Jats and Gurkhas, long before Guru Gobind Singh made them obligatory for his followers. In doing so the Guru had two objectives. In India, one way of telling a person's caste is by his name. In making all Sikhs Singhs (and Kaurs) he made them into one casteless fraternity. In choosing Singh and Kaur, he also emphasised martial traits which he hoped to infuse in them.

A Sikh child is given his name soon after he is born. The usual custom is to say a short prayer, open the Granth Sahib at random and pick a name beginning with the first letter of the first word on the left page. Very often this practice is dispensed with and the family decides on the child's name and announces it to the congregation after prayers.

Although the vast majority of Sikhs abide by the Guru's ordinance and are content to remain plain and simple Singhs, a growing number now attach their caste or village names to themselves. Thus those belonging to Guru Nanak's caste describe themselves as Bedis, e.g. the cricketer, Bishen Singh Bedi. Those belonging to the caste of the last six Gurus add Sodhi to theirs, e.g. Kartar Singh Sodhi. As a consequence, most Hindu caste names can be found amongst Sikhs, e.g. Justice M.S. Joshi (Brahmin), Comrade (Communist leader) Avtar Singh Malhotra (Kshatriya), General Jagjit Singh Arora (Vaishya). The lower castes often take on surnames of higher castes. Jat tribal names like Randhawa, Gill, Grewal, Sandhu and Siddhu are commonly used. Equally common is to add the name of the village, e.g. Harchand Singh *Longowal*, Gurcharan Singh *Tohra*, Parkash Singh *Badal*. Sikh poets often follow the convention common among Urdu poets and add their pseudonyms to their names, e.g. Pritam Singh 'Safeer' (envoy). Sometimes the combination of names can be quite incongruous, e.g. Gopal Singh *Dardi* which literally translated would mean cow-protector-lion-who-feels the-anguish of others.

Love for martial traditions is reflected in Sikh names like Laftain (Lieutenant), Kaptaan (Captain), Major and Jarnail (General). A child born in his maternal grandfather's house (*naankey*) as was Guru Nanak, may be named Nanak Singh; the girl Nanki. One born on *Basant Panchami*, may be a Basant Singh or Basant Kaur. Nihang Sikhs often give themselves wishful names. During Mughal rule a favourite name was Dilli Tor Singh (the lion who will destroy Delhi); during British rule, London Tor Singh. Amongst the peasantry, if the child is fair, he may be named Angrez (English) Singh or Angrez Kaur or just Bugga (white) Singh. Then there are

names that are not found among city dwellers but obtain among peasants, e.g. Shanghara, Jhimma, Balakara.

Sikh names, like their faith, derive both from Hindu and Muslim sources. Names like Iqbal, Nawab, Qurban and Mubarak are Persian and of Muslim ancestry. However, the majority are of Hindu-Sanskrit lineage, e.g. Ranjit, Surjit, Baljit (victors of battle); Baldev (good of war). Even English names have come into vogue amongst aristocratic families, e.g. Peter, Billy, David, Cecil (the House of Patiala); Anne, Pearl, Honey (the House of Jind).

Sikh men and women can have the same first name. Thus a Sunder Singh may have a sister named Sunder Kaur. But this practice is fast falling into desuetude. There are Sikh women, like the writer Ajit and her daughter Arpana who spell Kaur as Cour, and many more who drop it altogether and prefer the more distinctly feminine sounding Hindu, Muslim or European names. Among the younger generation of Sikh girls you can find a Shakuntala, Sarla, an Urmila, and a Savitri as well as a Nergis, a Belinda and a Nathasha.

The fact that most Sikhs are Singhs and there are not too many first names to choose from does not cause as much confusion as one might imagine. Quite often descriptive appendages are coined to distinguish incumbents of the same name. Thus two Kartar Singhs living in the same locality may be distinguished from each other as Kartar Singh '*Dhiddal*' (the pot-bellied) while the other may be Kartar Singh '*Ainkee*' (one who wears glasses).

Any name is grist to the Sikh-naming mill. A well-meaning but somewhat anglicised father in Delhi is said to have named his four sons Gentle Singh, Humble Singh, Noble Singh and Simple Singh.

The Sikh Turban

They come in many shapes and colours. The standard length of a turban is about six metres; and they come in all the hues of the rainbow—and many more. A Sikh has to sport a turban because of his unshorn hair. To appear without a turban is considered rude; to knock it off is regarded as a gross insult.

Sikh male children start with having their hair plaited. Then it is tied into a chignon on the top of their heads and covered with a light turban shaped scarf. Boys may start wearing turbans at any age from five and upwards. Some families have a turban-tying ceremony known as *dastar bandhi* (it is also performed by the eldest son of the family after the death of the father).

The colour of the turban does not signify anything. However, older people usually wear white which is also customary during mourning. Pink is worn at weddings and bright yellow on *Basant Panchami* in honour of the mustard flower which is then in full bloom. The practice of wearing black to signify sorrow was started by the Akalis during their agitation against British rule. This was later changed to steel-blue, the favourite colour of Guru Gobind Singh's soldiers.

There are innumerable styles of tying the turban. Sikh peasants usually wrap them round their heads without any concern for appearance. Sikh

dandies wear small under turbans—sometimes only a ribbon—and tie neatly tiered folds meeting at an acute angle above the middle of the forehead. Some stick pins in their turbans to ensure that the folds stay in place. The Namdhari sect wear only white and their turbans run flat across their foreheads looking somewhat like caps worn by chefs. The Nihangs make a fetish of their turbans and may wear half-a-dozen at the same time making them appear like hillocks.

It takes no more than a minute or two to tie a turban. In due course individual styles appear, some natural from the movements of the hand, some deliberately cultivated. Some have their turbans starched and flaunt *shamlas* (plumes) others will let half a metre dangle like a pony's tail over their spines. One great advantage of wearing a turban in a hot climate is that it keeps the head cool and protects the vulnerable rear of the scalp. No Sikh is known to have died of sunstroke.

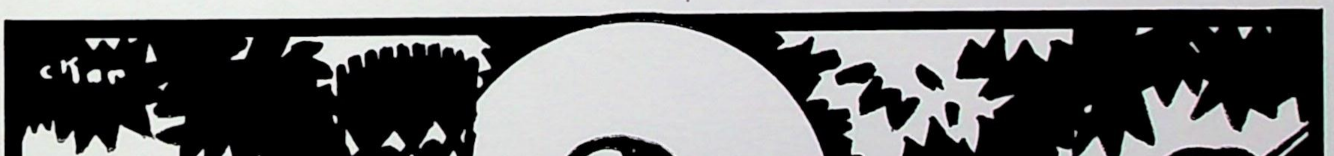
SARDARJI The Sikh equivalent of Mr or Esquire is Sardar. A married Sikh woman is a Sardarni. When one does not know the name, it is best to address a Sikh as Sardar Sahib and his wife as Sardarni Sahiba. These modes of address are current amongst the upper classes. Amongst the peasantry and the working class a man is referred to as 'Bhaiji' or 'Bhai Sahib' (brother) and a woman as 'Bibiji' (mistress) or 'Bhainji' (sister). Amongst the aristocracy the head of the family is addressed as 'Raja Sahib' and his wife as 'Rani Sahiba'; the elder son is addressed as 'Tikka Sahib' and his wife as 'Tikkarani'; and the young sons as 'Kunwars' and their wives as 'Kunwarranis'.

One also comes across professional titles attached to names. The commonest is Giani for a scholar or theologian as for Giani Zail Singh—the President. The Akali leader Tara Singh was referred to as Masterji or Master Tara Singh because he was once a schoolmaster.

SIKH JOKES Sikh jokes and jokes about the Sikhs are two different things; the only thing they have in common is that they are usually made up by the Sikhs themselves. Sikh jokes are usually about the tough and militant Nihangs, their sexual virility, their simple-mindedness and their behaviour under the influence of *bhang* (hashish) to which they are reputed to be extremely partial. The Nihangs have coined a vocabulary of their own, most of which traces back to their militant past and adversity in battle. An individual will refer to himself as a *fauj* or an army, or, *sawa lakh*, i.e. one hundred and twenty-five thousand men. Large numbers of them have been reduced to beggary. But they do not 'beg' for alms, they impose a 'tax' and demand it of the people they visit. The poorest of food is given fancy names. Thus onions are *ruppa* or 'silver', parched gram 'almonds', wild berries 'grapes' and chili, the 'quarrelsome dame'. When they want to urinate they ask 'can I frighten off a cheetah?' A satisfactory performance at the lavatory is described as the 'conquest of the great fort of Chittor'.

Jokes about the Sikhs are invariably about their simple-mindedness. For many years these have been hitched on to the seniormost Sikh Minister in the Punjab or the Central Government. As a rule Indians are extremely sensitive about

fun being made of them and resent even the mildest leg-pull. The Sikhs are an exception to this rule. They not only enjoy anecdotes about themselves but are also the authors of most of them. This attitude is born out of a sense of confidence that in any sphere of activity, physical or mental, in any profession: farming, soldiering, medicine, science or art, they can and do outsmart their sister communities, the Hindus, Muslims and the Christians.



Guru Nanak with his earliest disciples, the Muslim rebeck-player Mardana and the Hindu peasant, Bala. Woodcut made from picture in the British Museum.



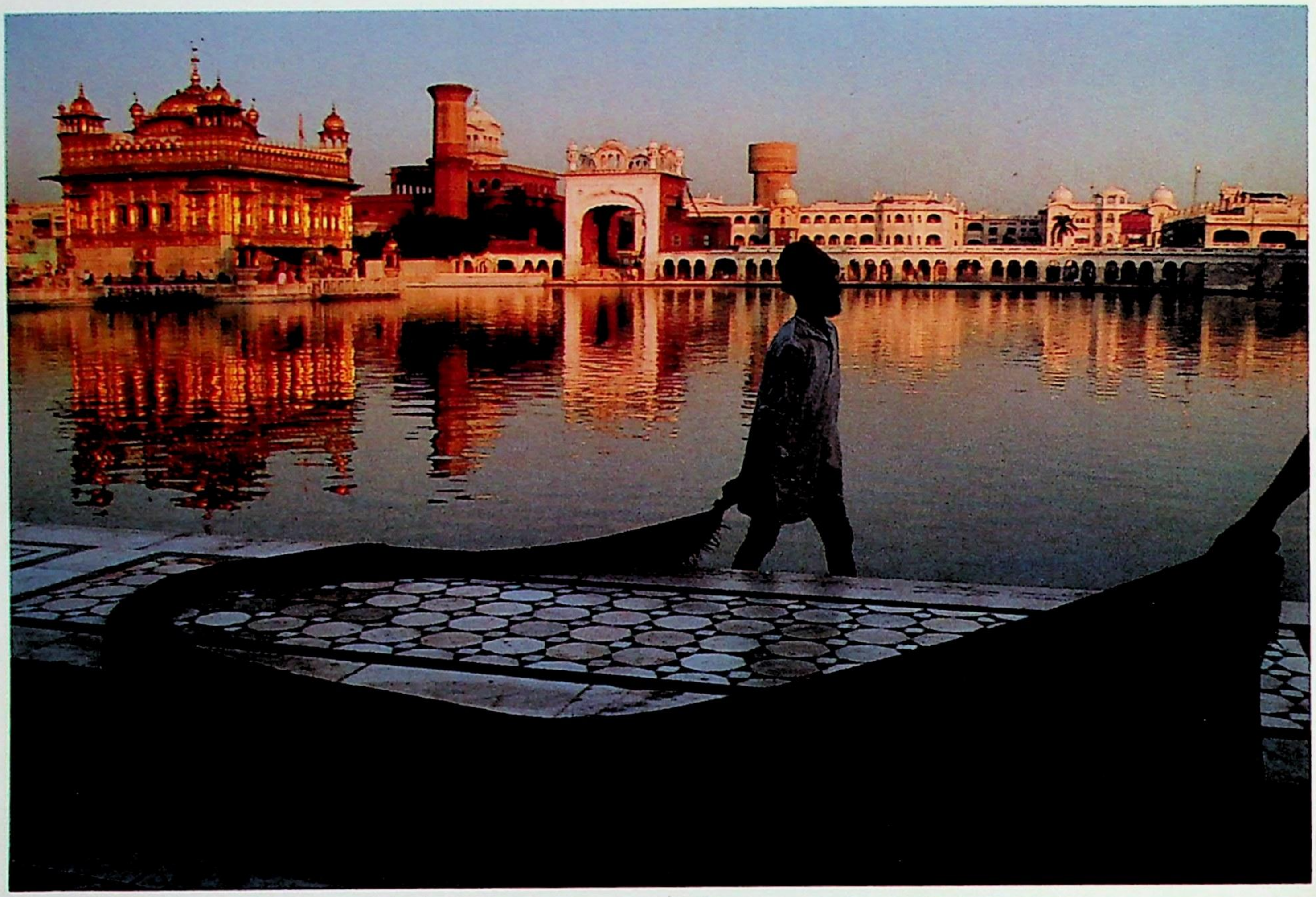
Forecourt of the Harimandir. After circumambulating the Pool of Immortality (Amritsar) pilgrims relax and gossip.



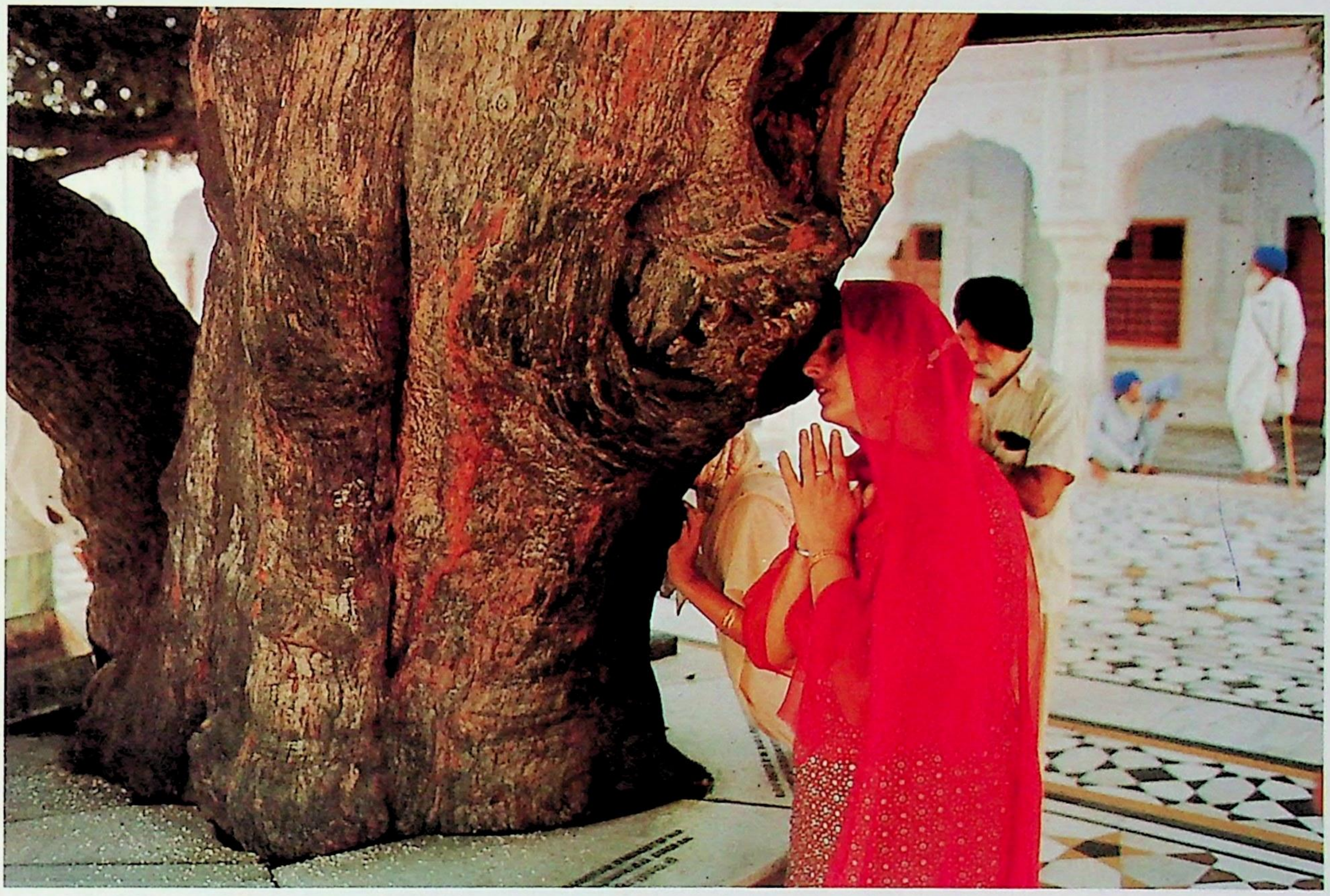
The *Raagi* or the professional hymn singer arrives with his harmonium wrapped in a sheet.



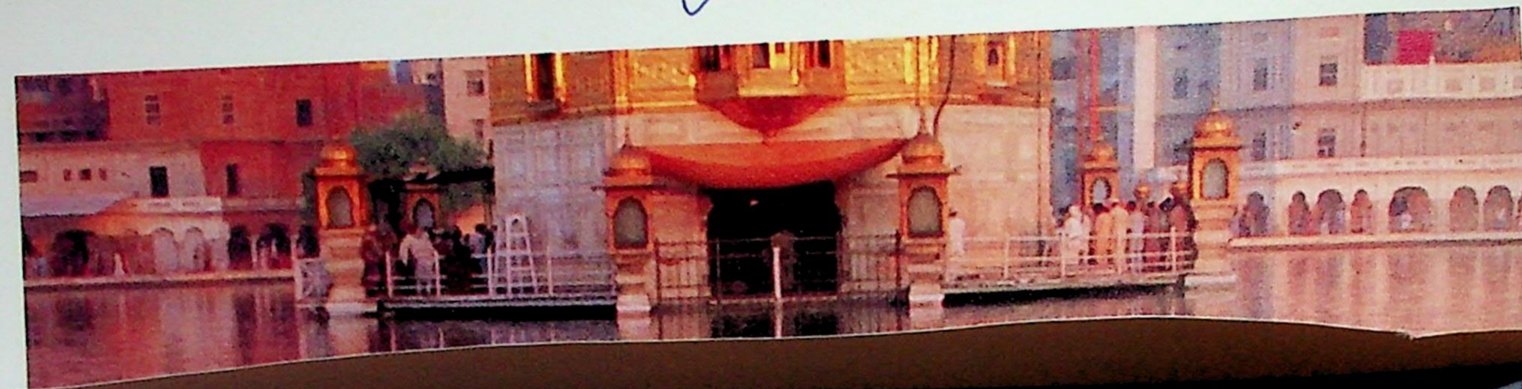
Besides Sikhs, large numbers of Hindus can be seen at the Harimandir every day, offering prayers.



Cleansing the pilgrims' path. Since thousands of worshippers bathe and circumambulate round the pool of the Harimandir, it is swept every few hours.



Babey Buddhay da Ber—an ancient tree trunk beside the sacred pool. It has become an object of worship as it is believed that Baba Buddha, who served the first six Gurus, supervised the digging of the pool from beneath this tree.

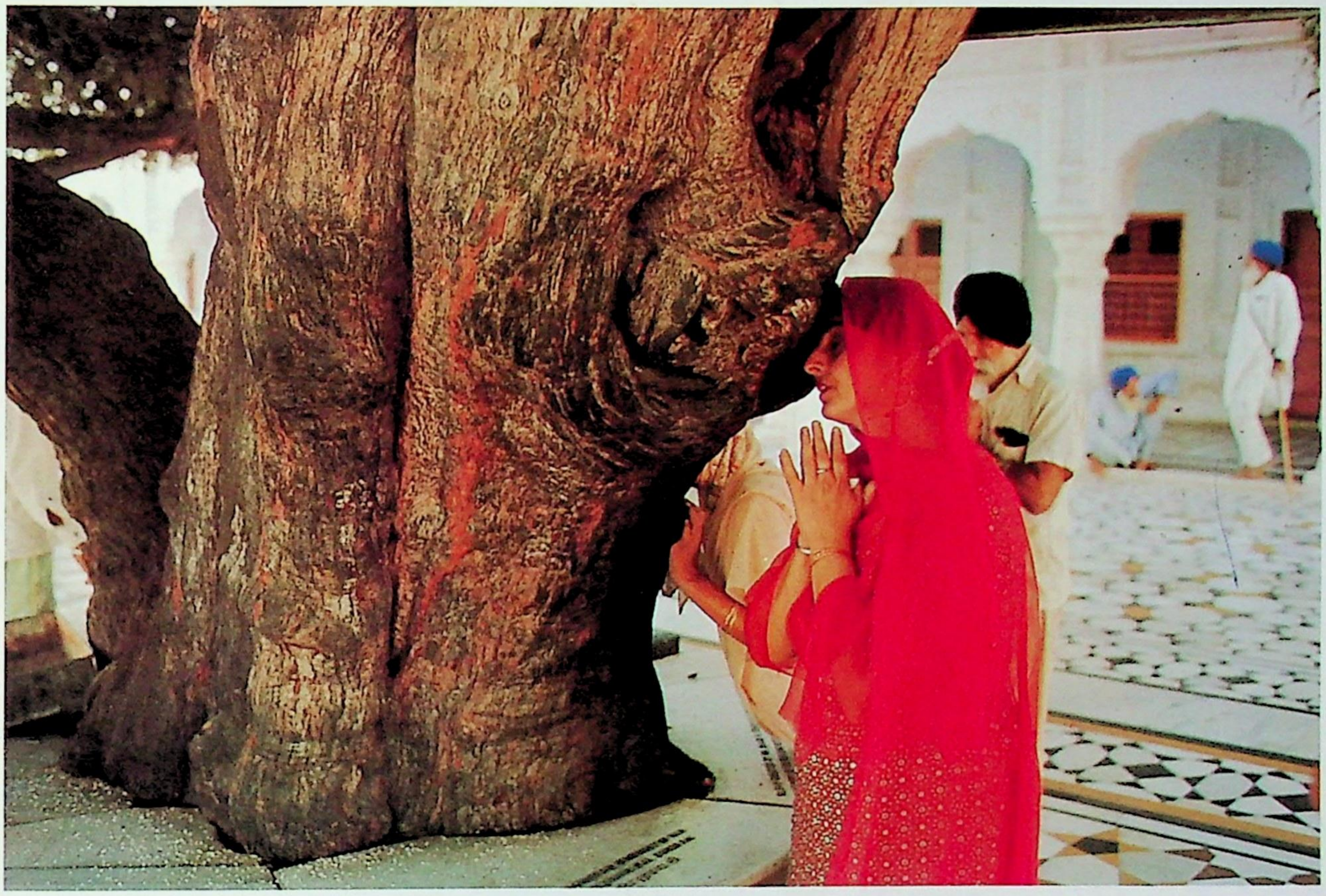




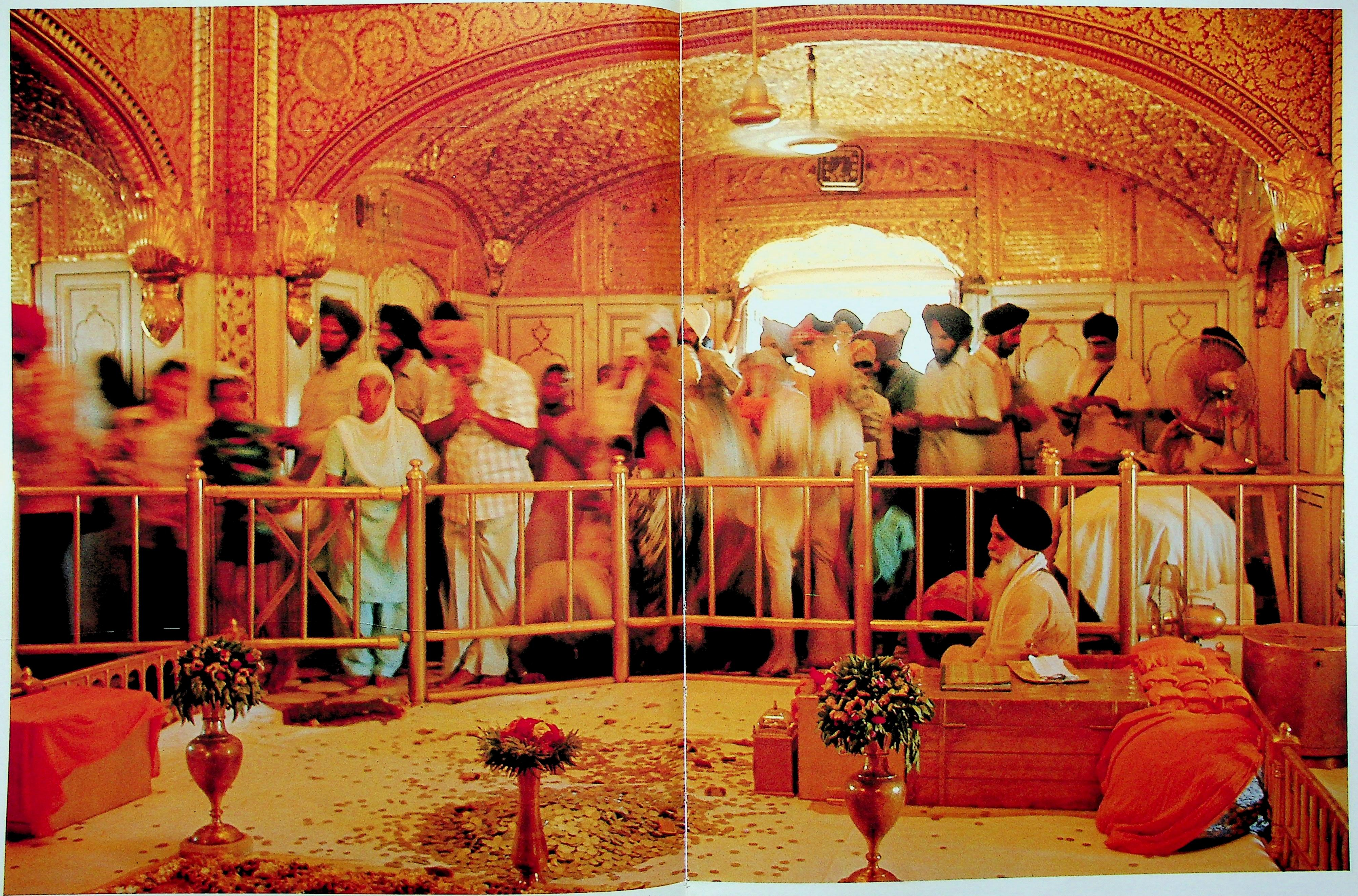
Cleansing the pilgrims' path. Since thousands of worshippers bathe and circumambulate round the pool of the Harimandir, it is swept every few hours.



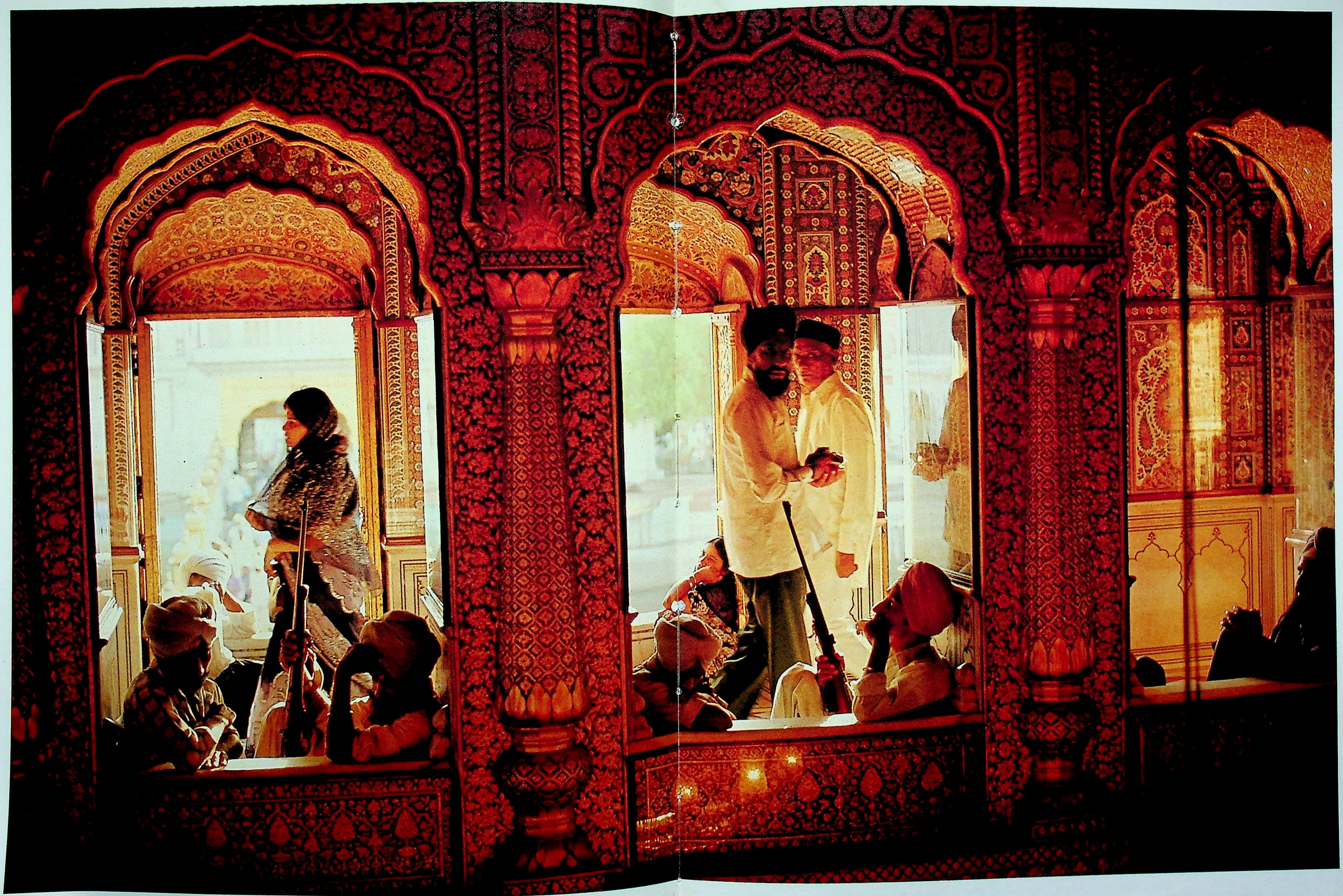
Kirpan or sabre is one of the five emblems of the Sikh faith. Orthodox Sikhs never part from them and wear them even in bed and while bathing.



Babey Buddhay da Ber—an ancient tree trunk beside the sacred pool. It has become an object of worship as it is believed that Baba Buddha, who served the first six Gurus, supervised the digging of the pool from beneath this tree.



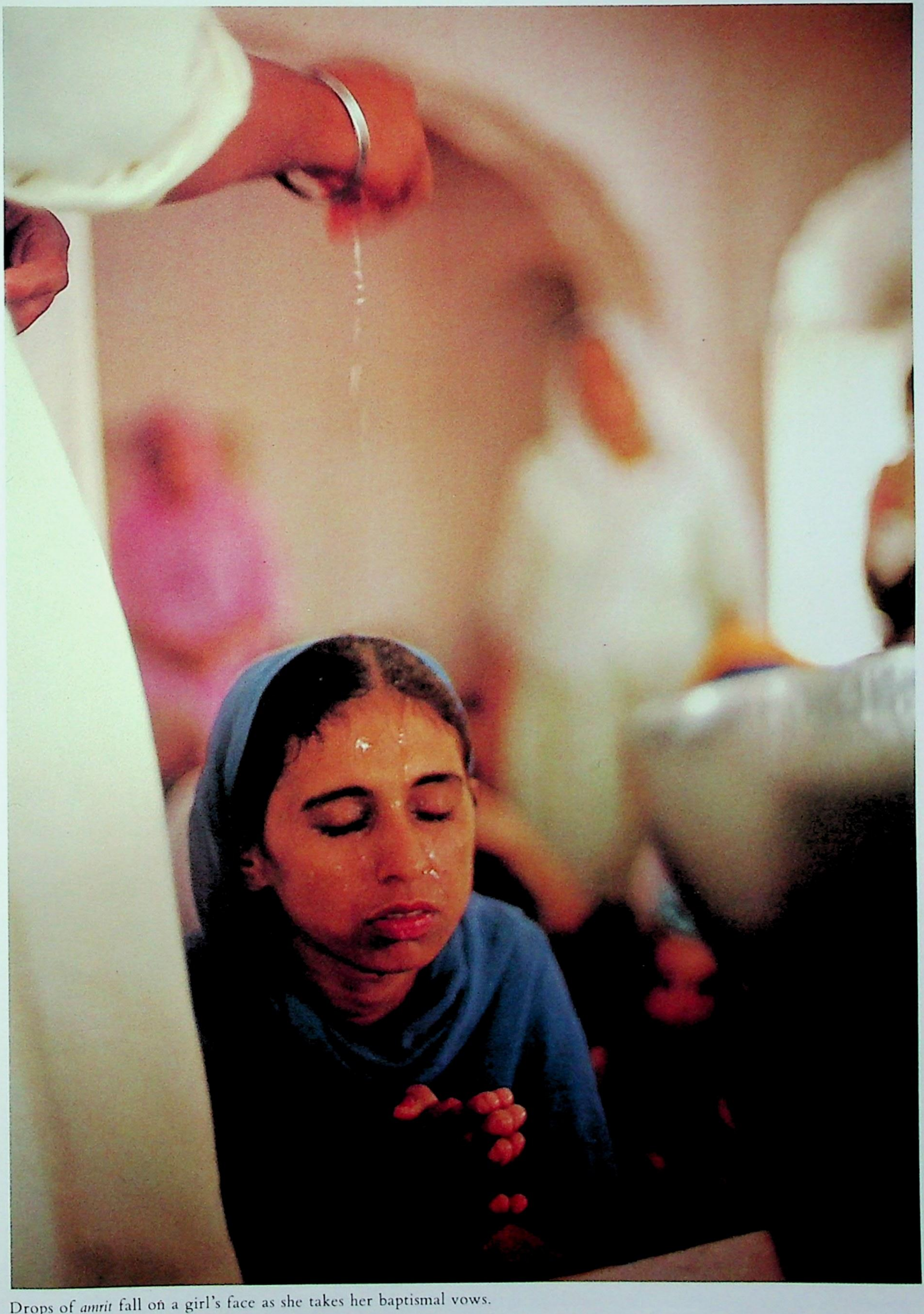
The sanctum sanctorum of the Harimandir. Worshippers make obeisance and offer money which is used for the welfare of the community.



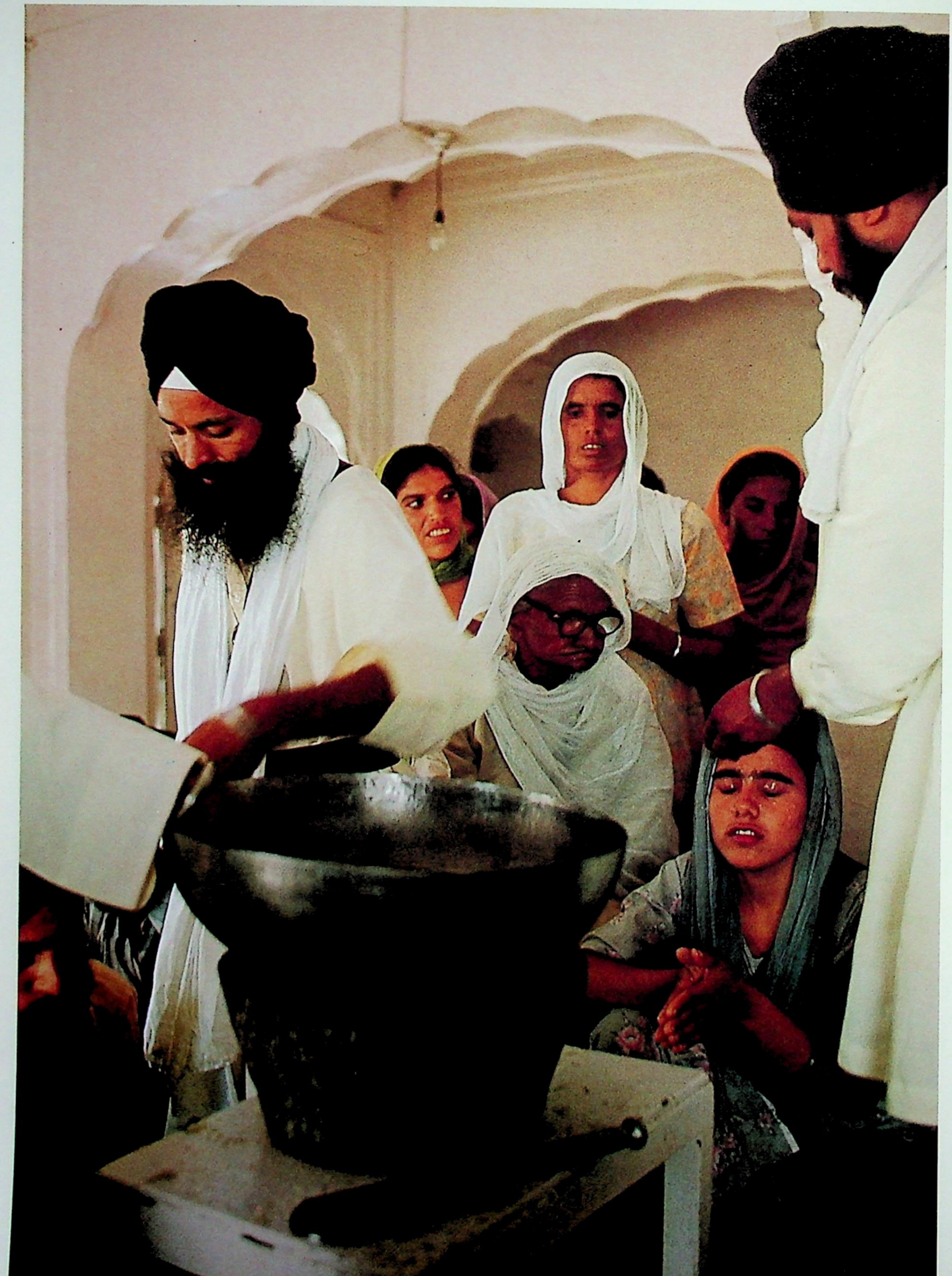
It is not unusual to see men carrying arms in a Sikh *gurdwara*. Militarism is an essential part of the Khalsa tradition.



Pahul or Baptism: the 'Five Beloved' (*Panj pyaras*) prepare *amrit* (nectar) in a bowl. Those to be baptised will drink out of this bowl and be declared members of the Khalsa fraternity. The baptism ceremony was first performed by Guru Gobind Singh at Anandpur in 1699.



Drops of *amrit* fall on a girl's face as she takes her baptismal vows.



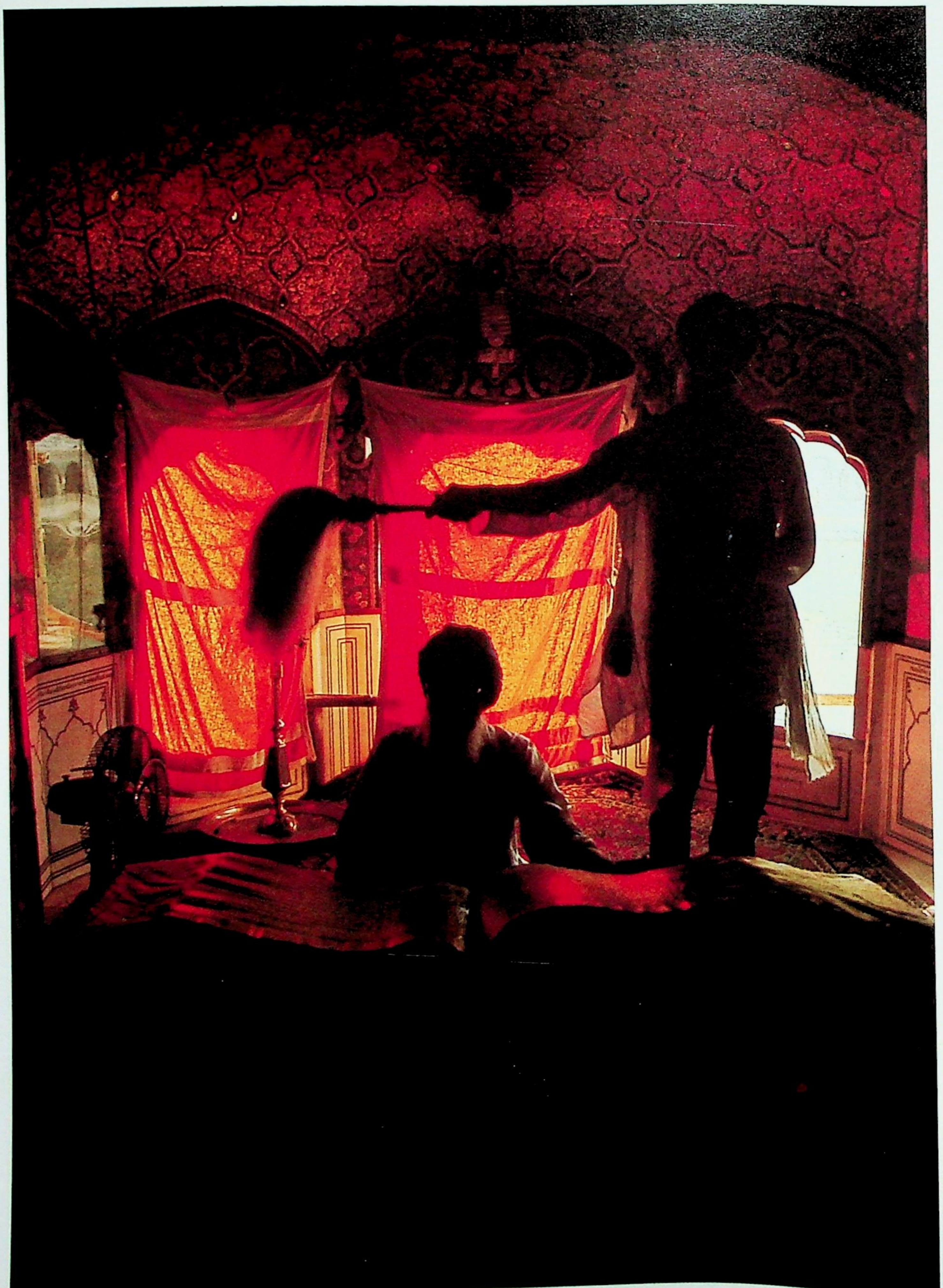
A girl initiate takes the vows of the Khalsa. Note the double-edged dagger (*khanda*) on the table. *Amrit* is stirred by the *khanda* to the chanting of hymns.



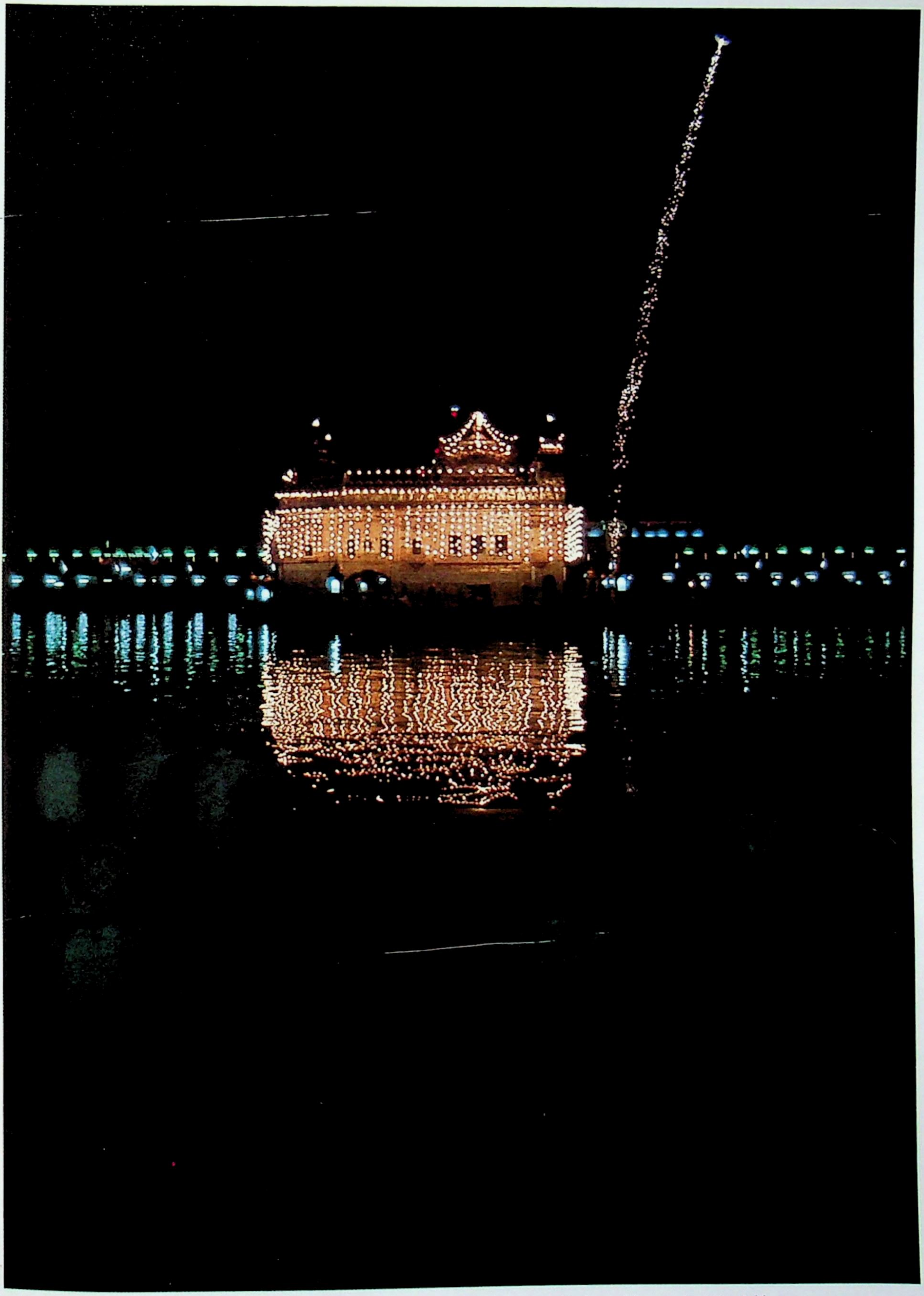
Young Singhs. Baptism should only take place after a person has attained puberty. This is often overlooked and children are initiated before they can understand the vows.



Composite picture of a *granthi* (scripture reader) and a worshipper with gilded domes on the roof of the Golden Temple and the Clock-Tower in the background.



The Holy Granth Sahib—the only object of worship in a Sikh temple. It was compiled by Guru Arjun in 1604 and besides compositions of the Gurus has hymns by Hindu as well as Muslim saints. An attendant with a fly-whisk made of Yak's tail stands behind the *granthi* the reader of the scripture.



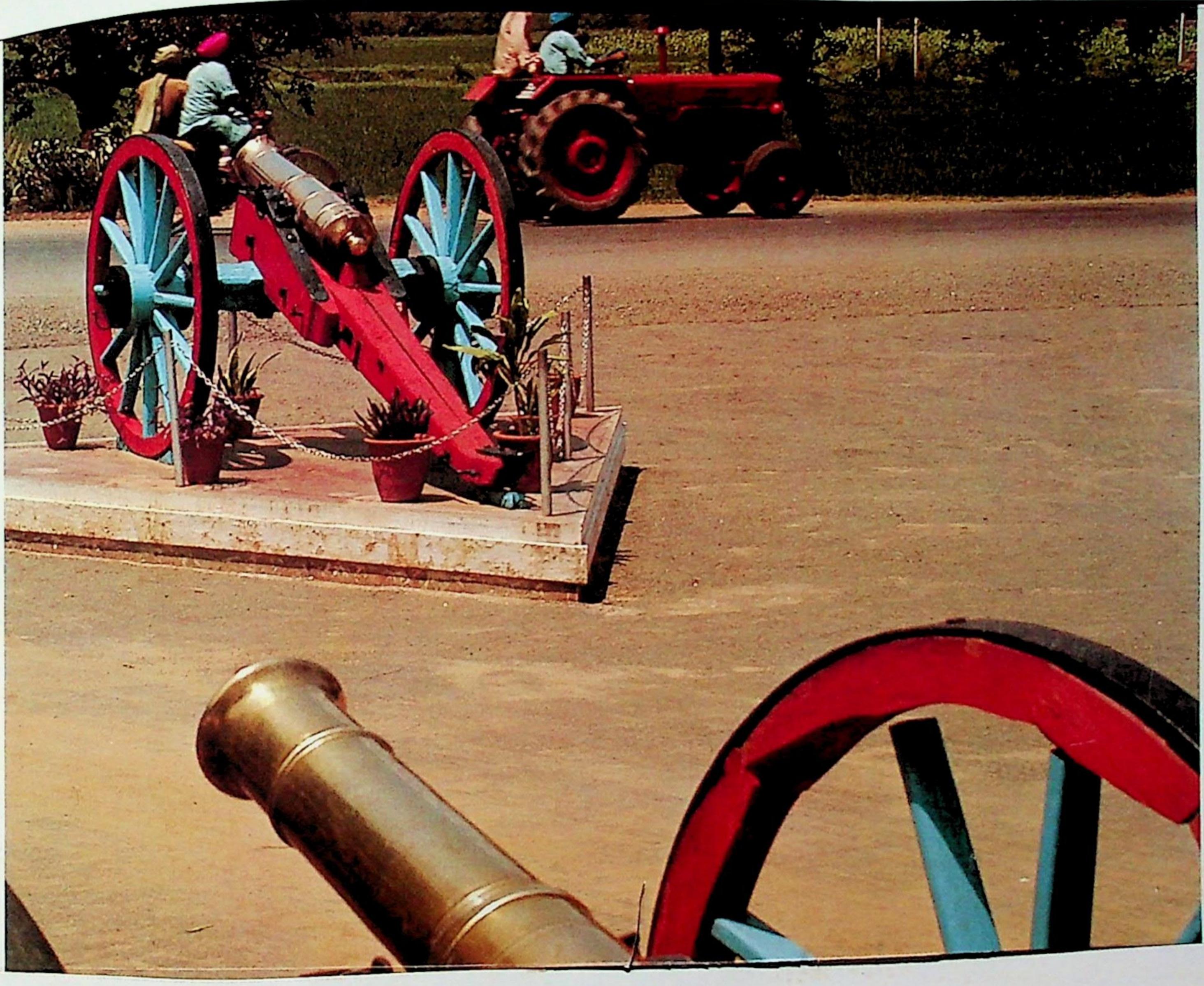
On *Diwali,* the Festival of Lamps, the Golden Temple is lit up and there is a display of fireworks. The Sikhs celebrate all Hindu festivals.

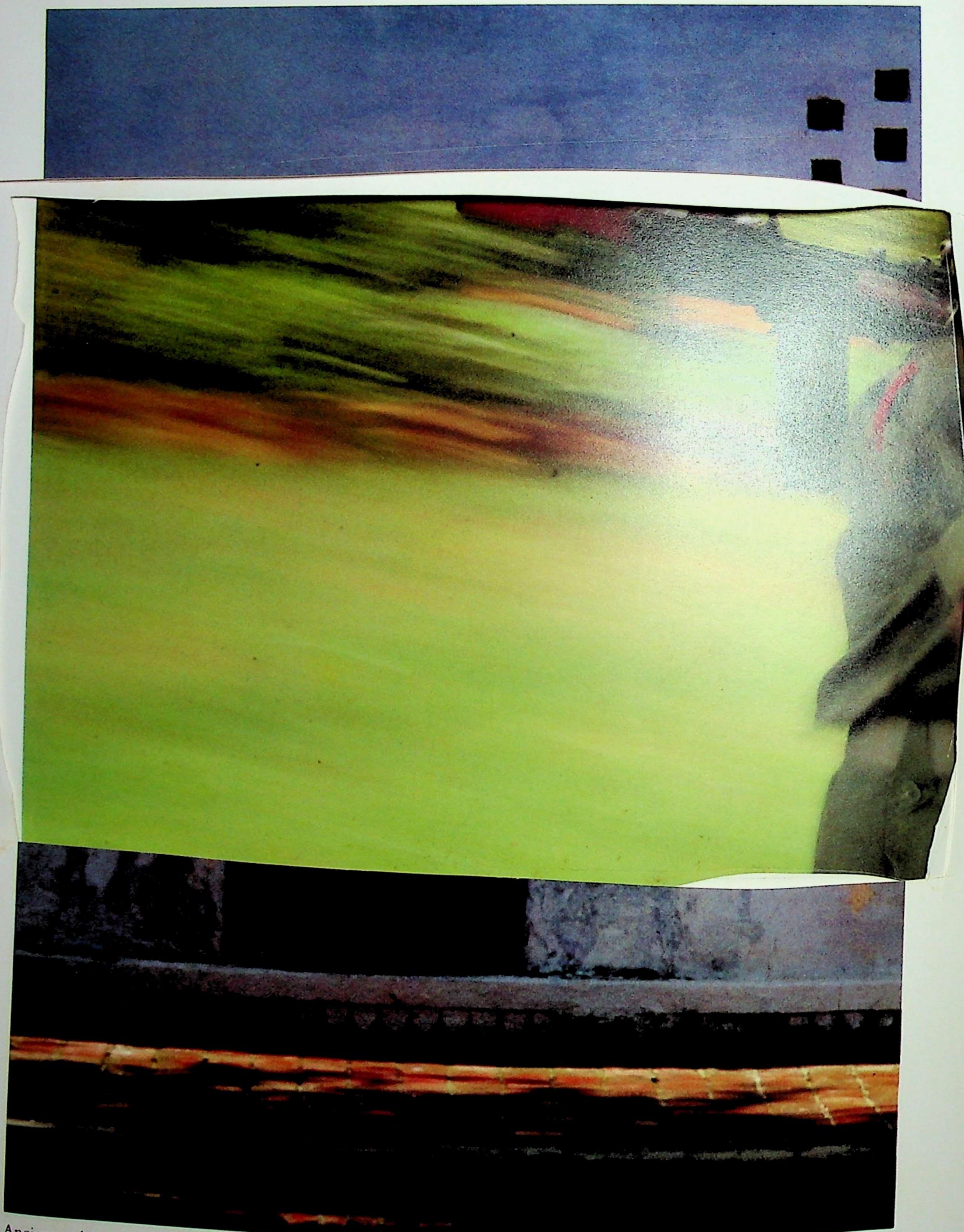


The martial tradition remains the most cherished heritage of the Sikhs. The Sikhs are still the backbone of India's defence services.









Ancient and modern Sikh soldier stands guard beside an old Sikh cannon kept as a decoration in an old fort.



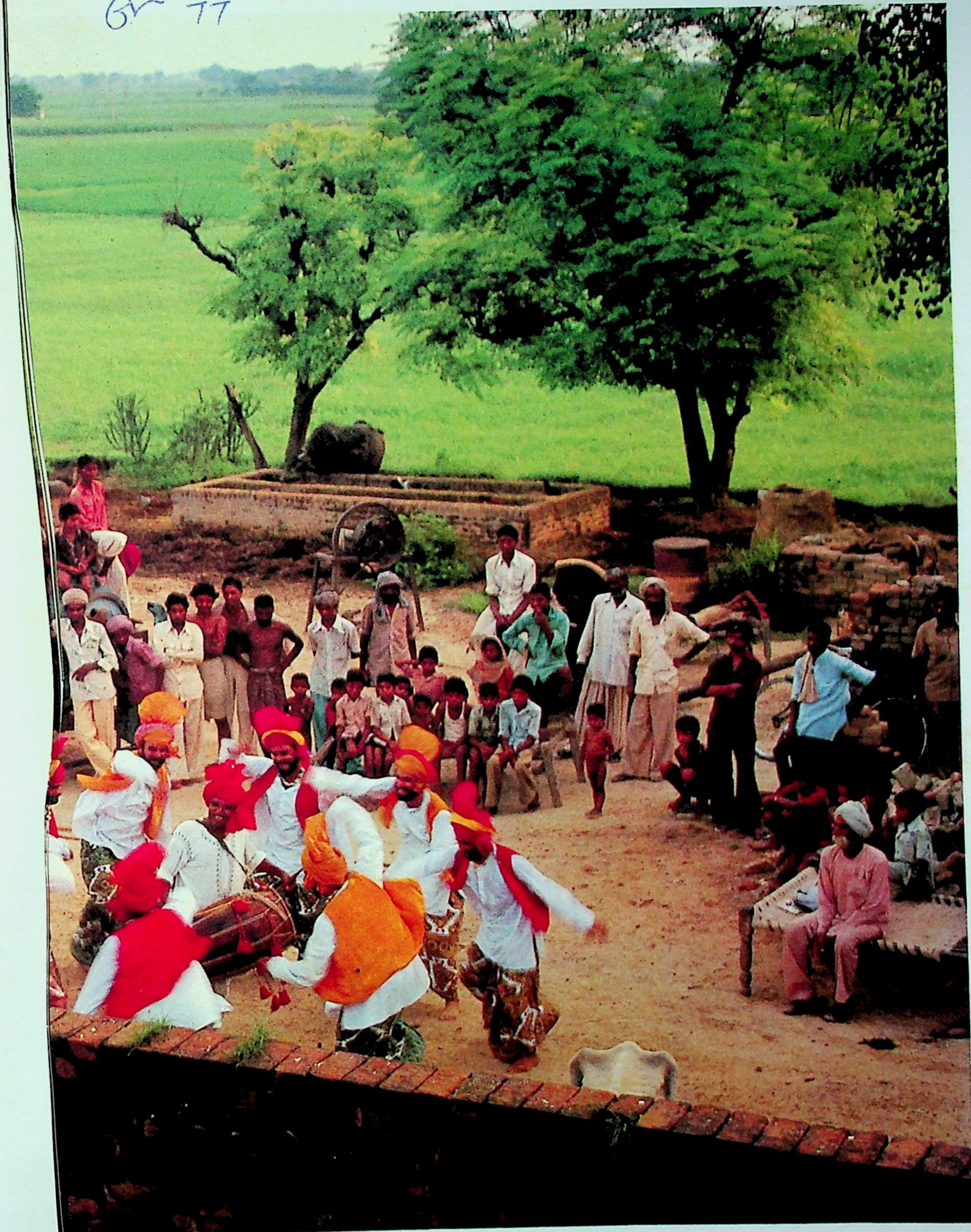
Sikh cannons, made in the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and manned largely by Muslim gunners, can be seen in open air museums of large towns.

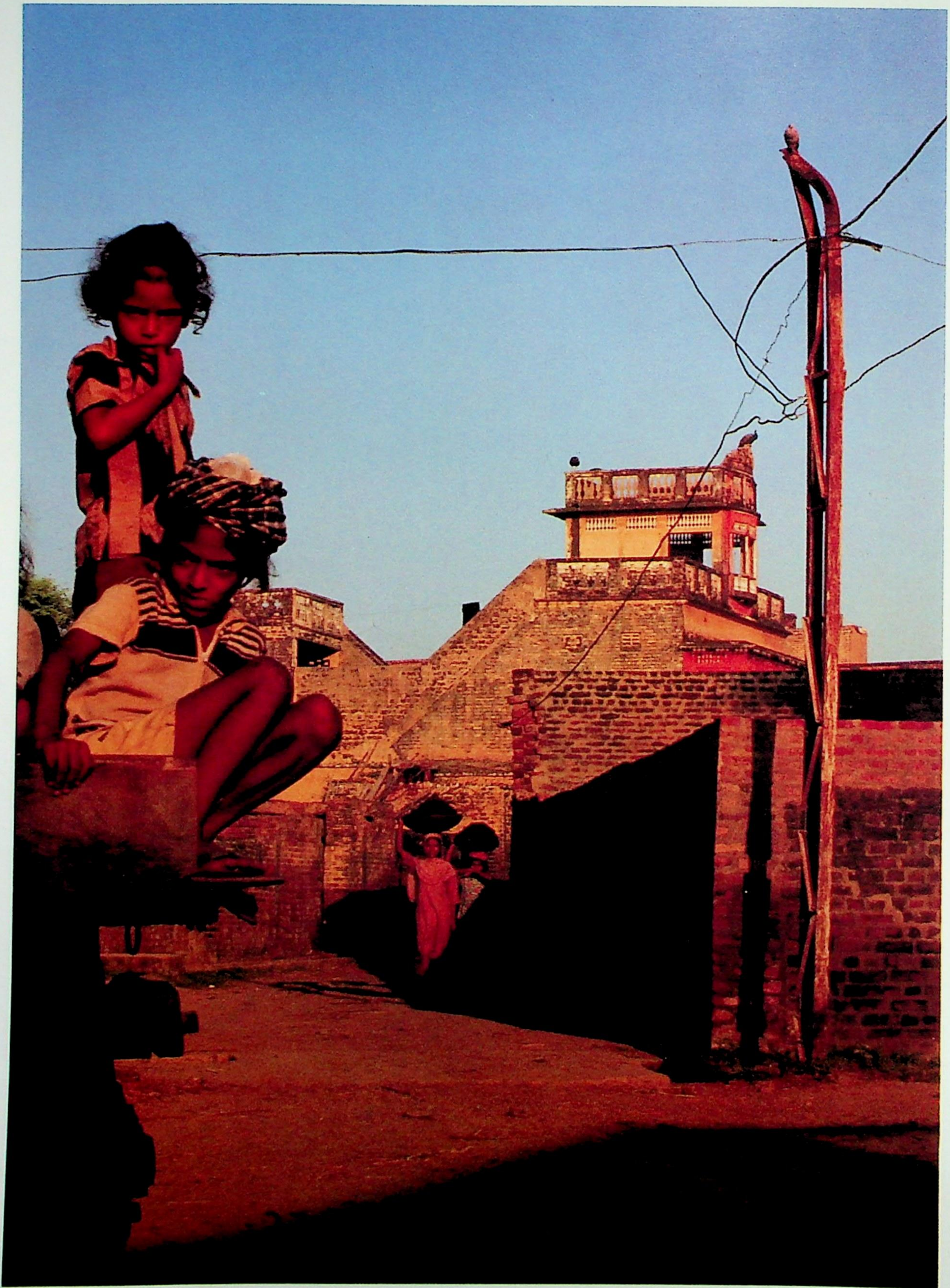


Giddha—the folk-song and dance of the Punjab performed by girls.

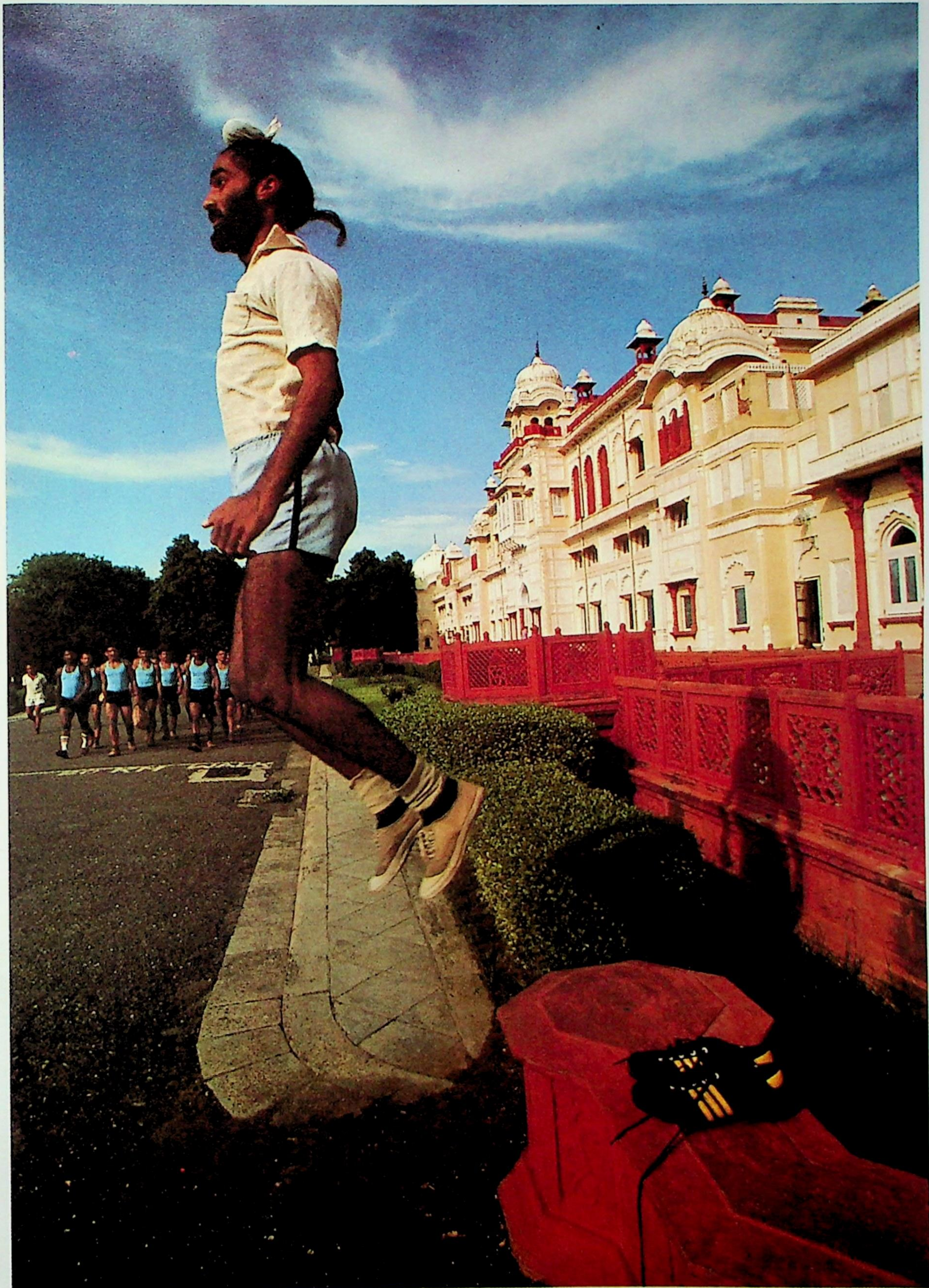








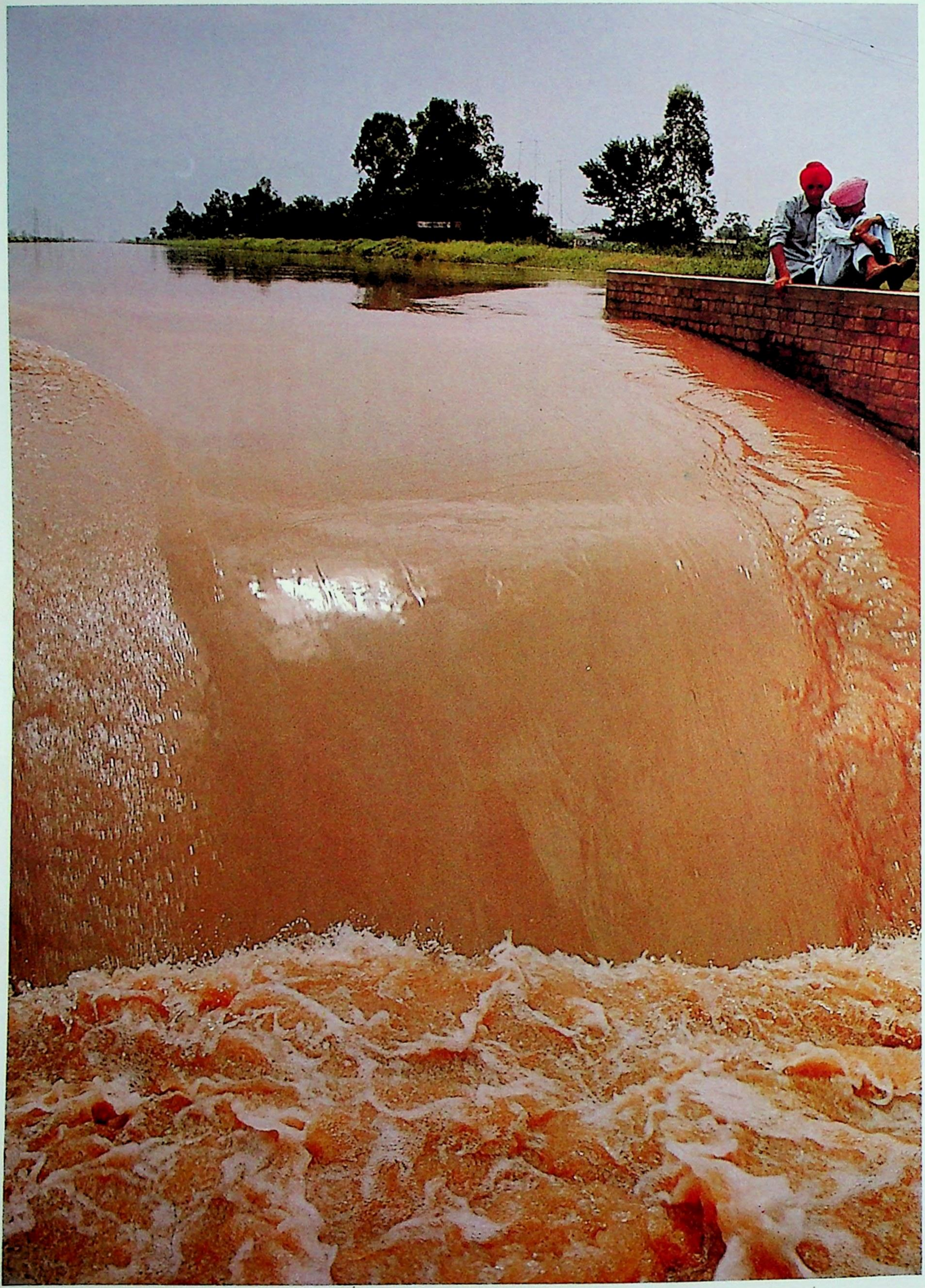
A Punjabi Sikh village. Most homes are built of bricks and every village has electric power.



Sikh athelete limbers up. The Moti Bagh Palace of the Maharaja of Patiala has been converted into the National Institute of Sports.



Come summer, swings go up on tree branches. Swinging is largely a feminine pastime and most popular during the monsoon.



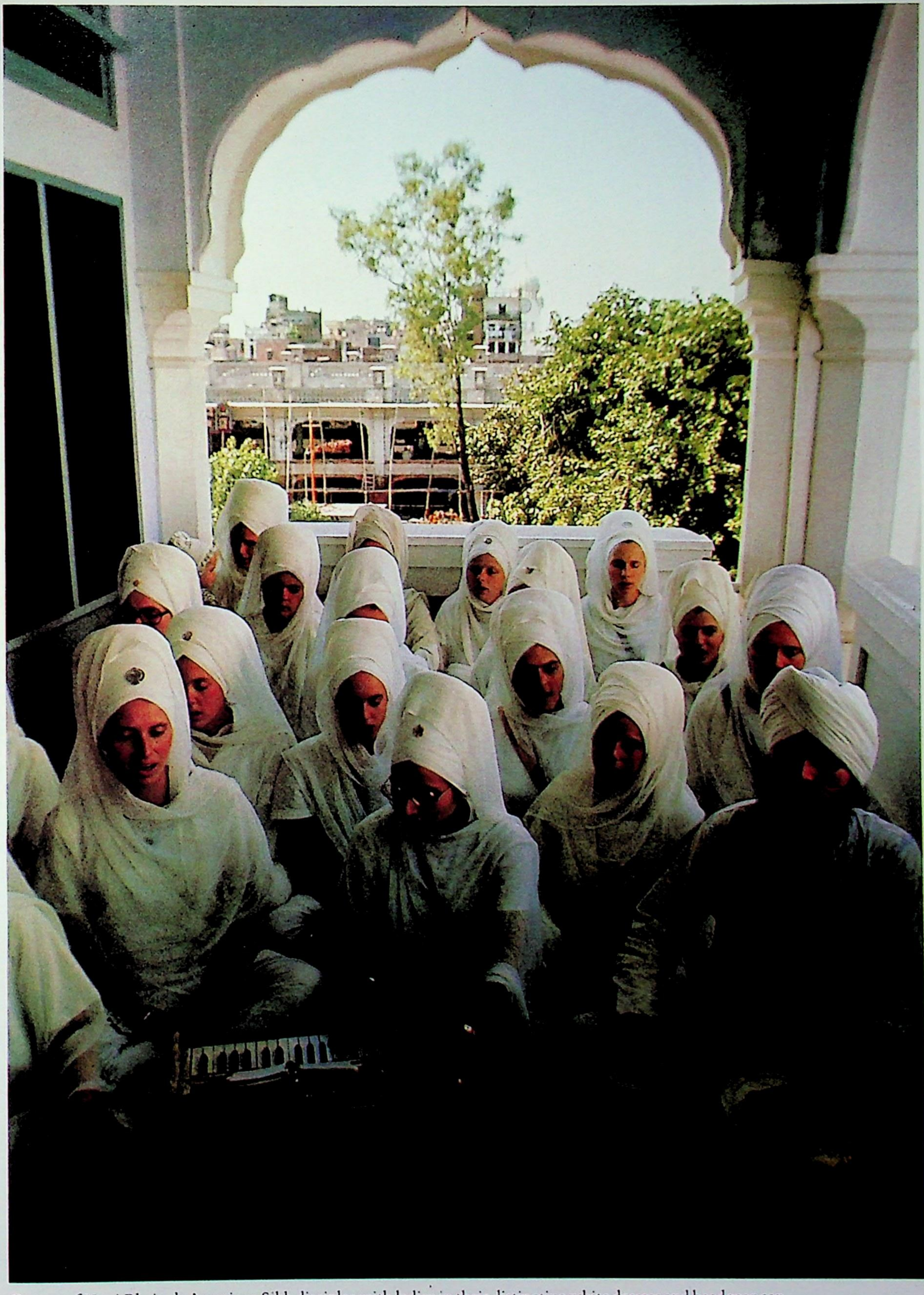
The Punjab has an extensive network of canals. Every village is electrified. Canals and tubewells ensure a continuous supply of water to the fields.



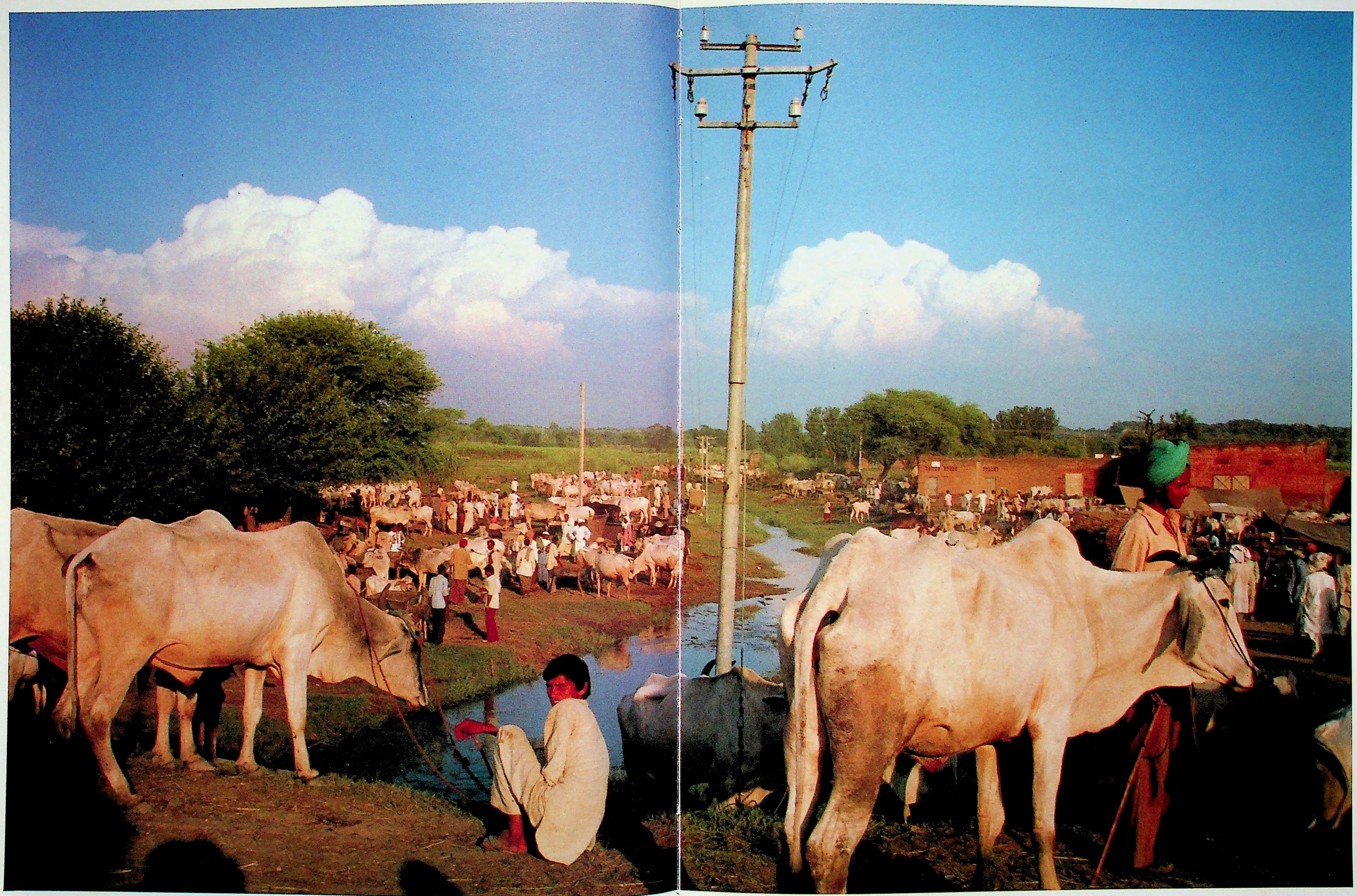
Dreams of prosperity. Most well-to-do peasants' homes have radio and television sets, and if not an ice-box, a fresco of its contents.



The Sikh elite. There are many educational institutions patterned after the English public schools where sons and daughters of the elite receive modern education along with respect for Sikh traditions.



Groups of Yogi Bhajan's American Sikh disciples with ladies in their distinctive white dresses and headgear can be seen in many *gurdwaras.* They have learnt Sikh hymns and perform *keertan* in traditional *ragaas* of Indian music.



Cattle market. The Sikh's favourite drink is buffalo milk. But breeds of European cows are much in demand because they yield more and richer milk.



Mechanised farming. The Punjab leads the rest of India in the number of tractors and harvesters. The Sikhs are proud of being the best farmers of Asia.



'Tomato seedlings on sale here' proclaims the young lady on the hoarding placed in the middle of a farm.



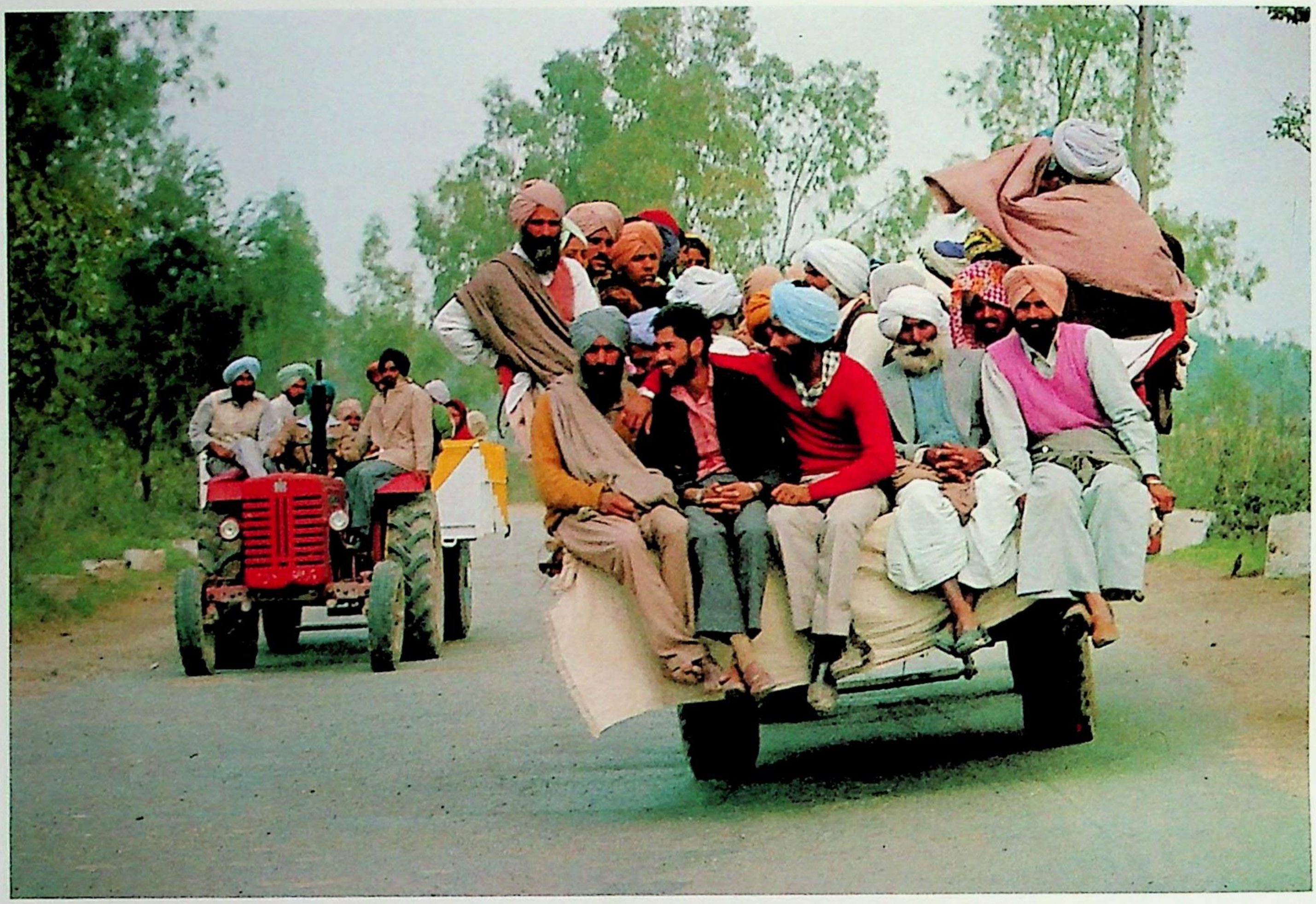
Ancient and modern. Overhead cables carry electric power from Bhakra Dam to all corners of the Punjab. Beneath them an ancient bullock-cart plods its weary way homewards.



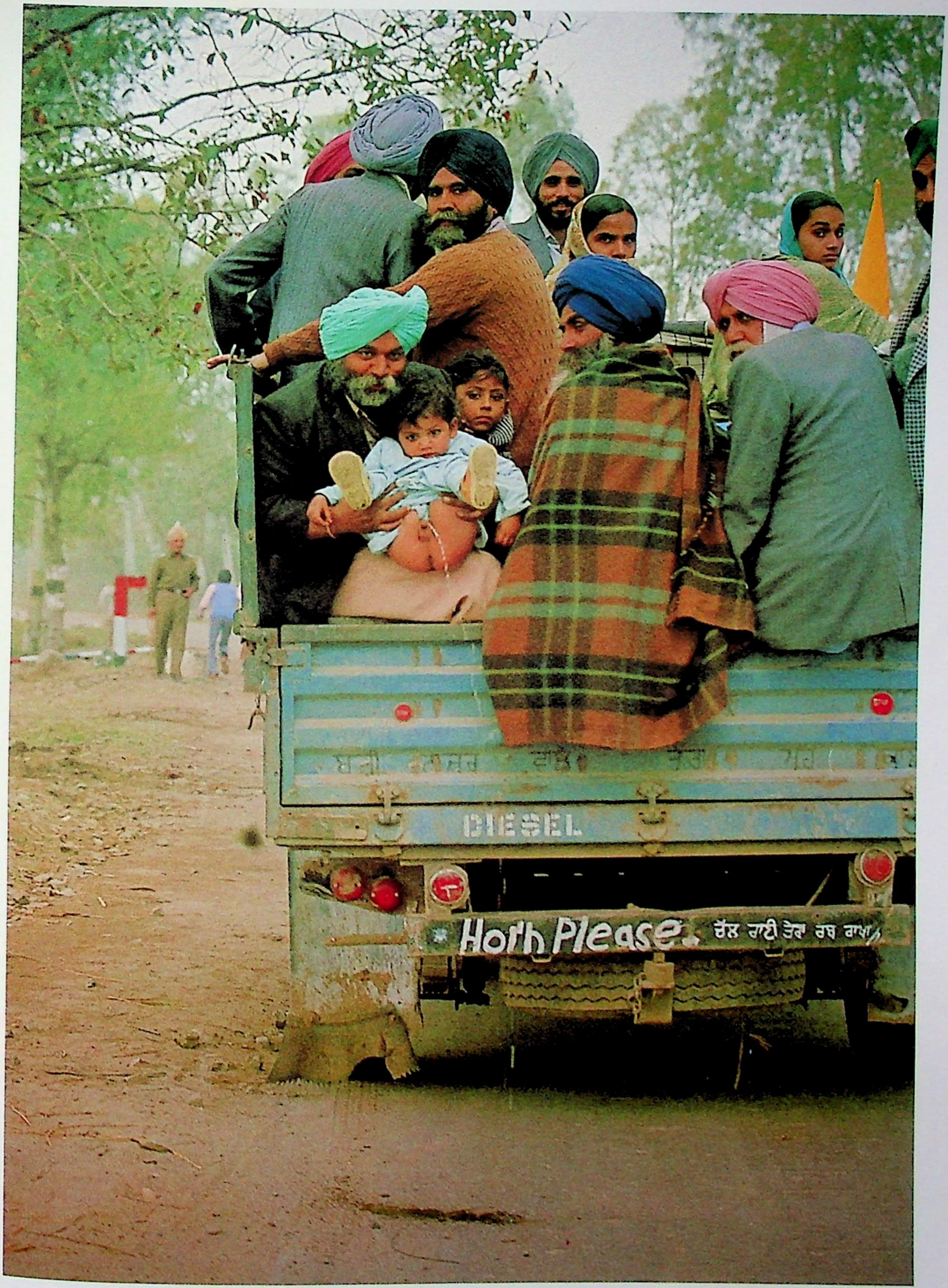
Pastoral Punjab—a picture of peace and prosperity at monsoon time.



Playtime. Village boys play hide and seek under the branches of a fallen banyan.



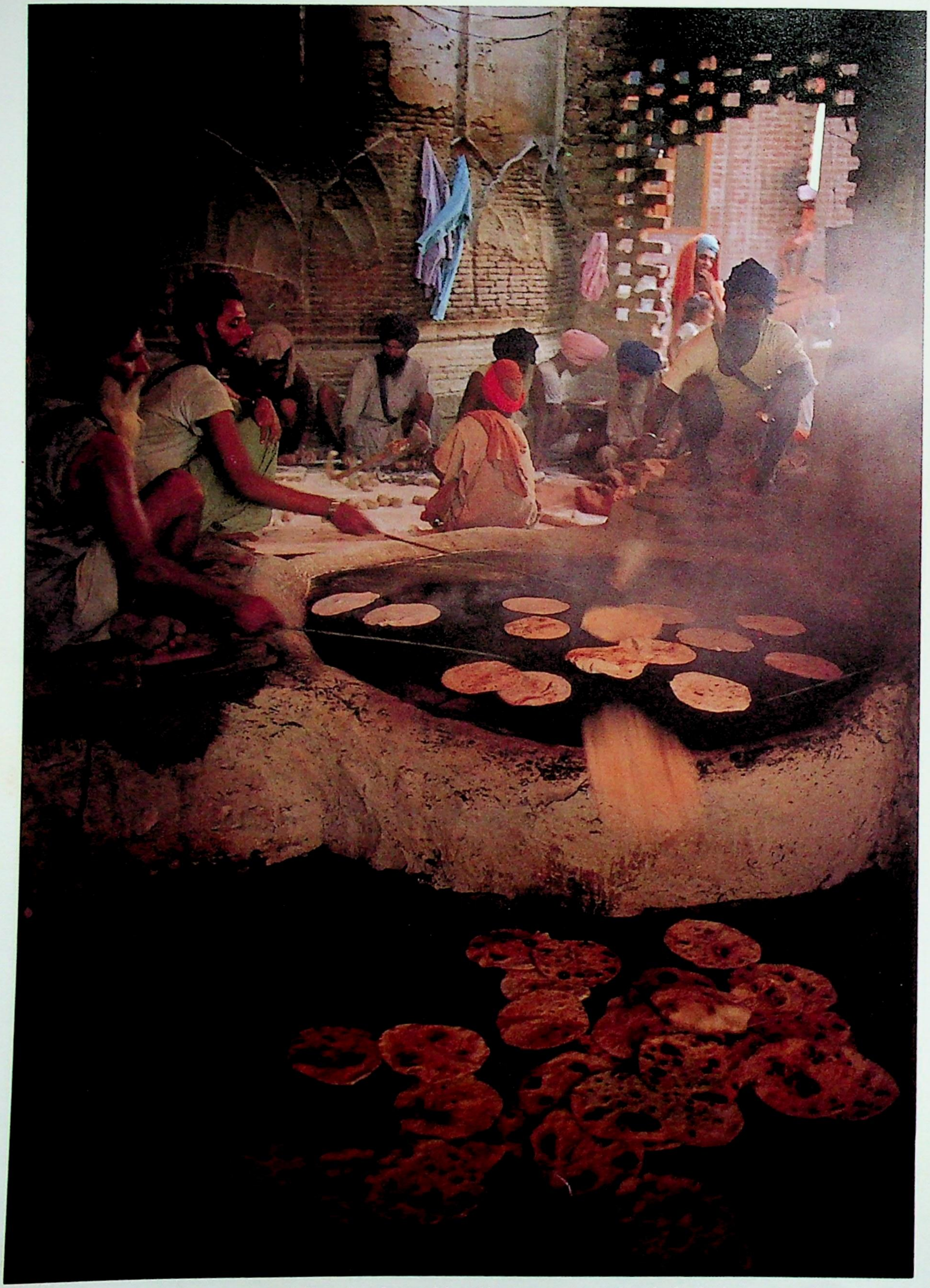
All roads lead to Anandpur. A few days before *Holi*, the Festival of Colour, Sikh peasants make for Anandpur where the Khalsa Panth was founded by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699. The Sikh festival is known as *Hola Mohalla*.



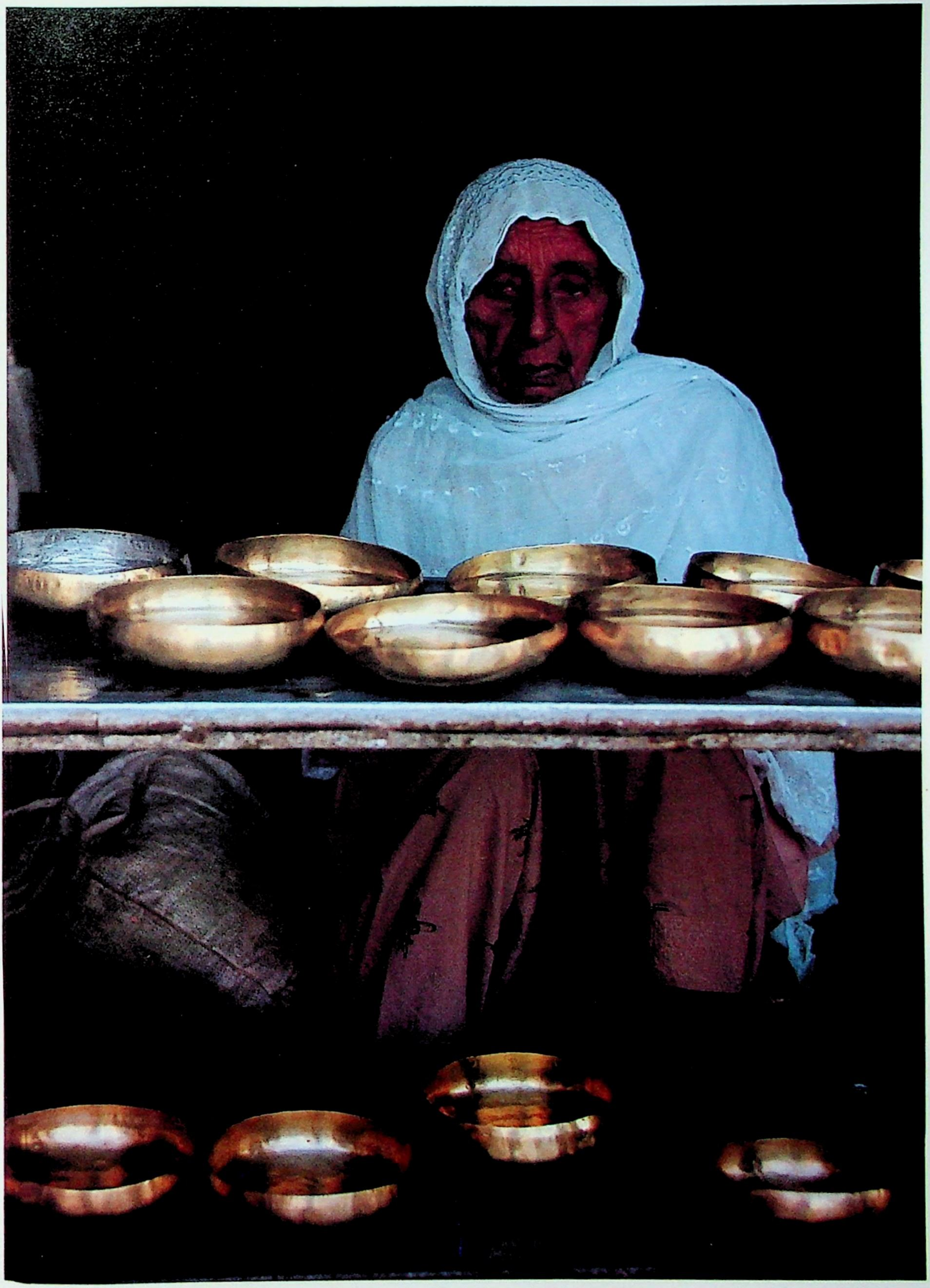
No time to stop by the roadside. Baby Khalsa performs what is known in common parlance as 'shooing off a cheetah'.



Free labour—*kaar sewa*. Most Sikh temples and pools surrounding some of them have been built by men and women volunteers.



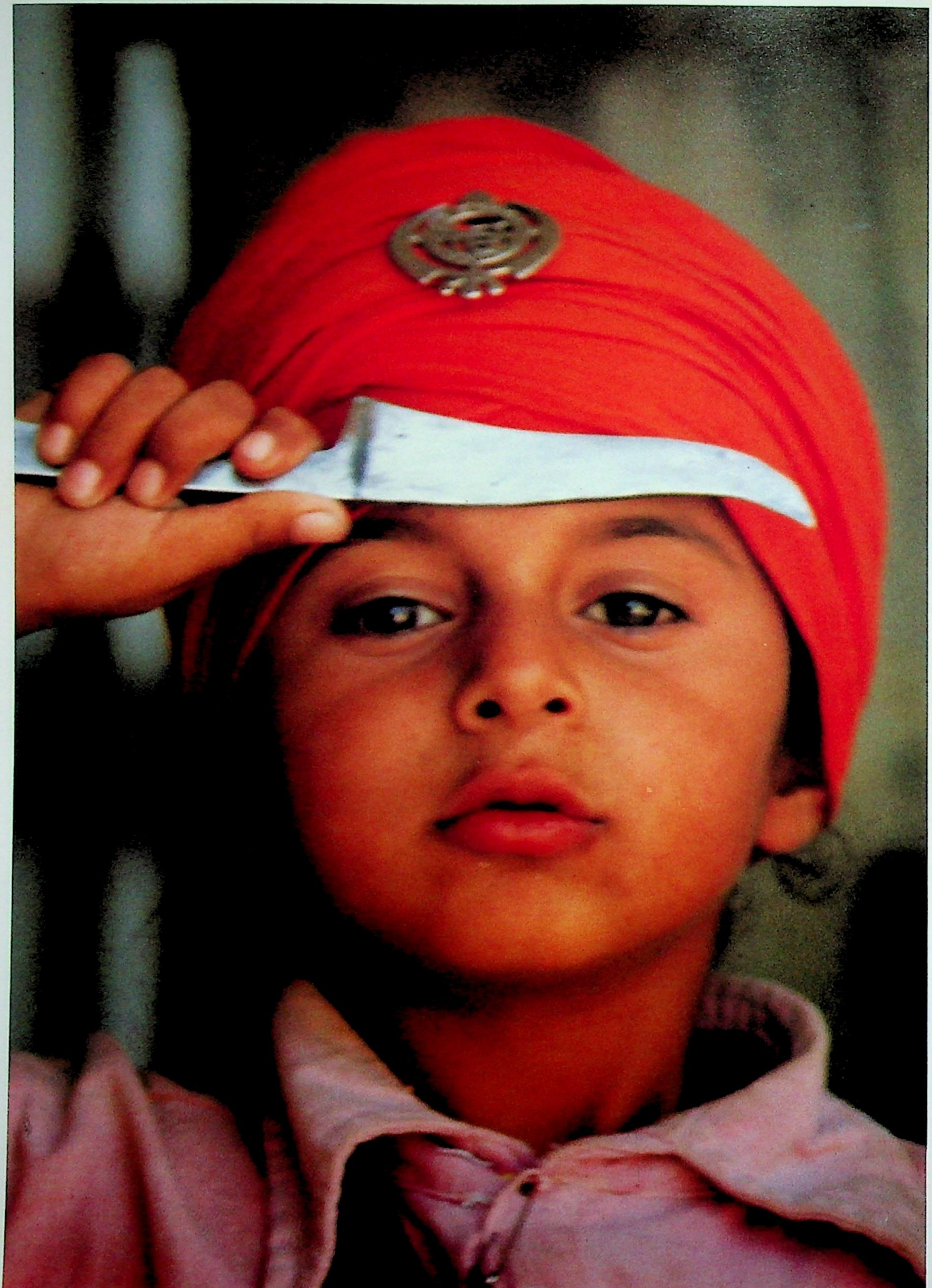
Guru's kitchen or the *Guru-ka-Langar* is a hallowed tradition of the Sikhs. Every person who asks for food at any *gurdwara* is fed free of charge. On religious festivals upwards of 100,000 may eat in the Guru's kitchen.



Serwice earns merit. *Gurdwara* kitchens are entirely maintained by voluntary service. Some persons, like this old ladyv, spend many hours every day catering to the needs of pilgrims.



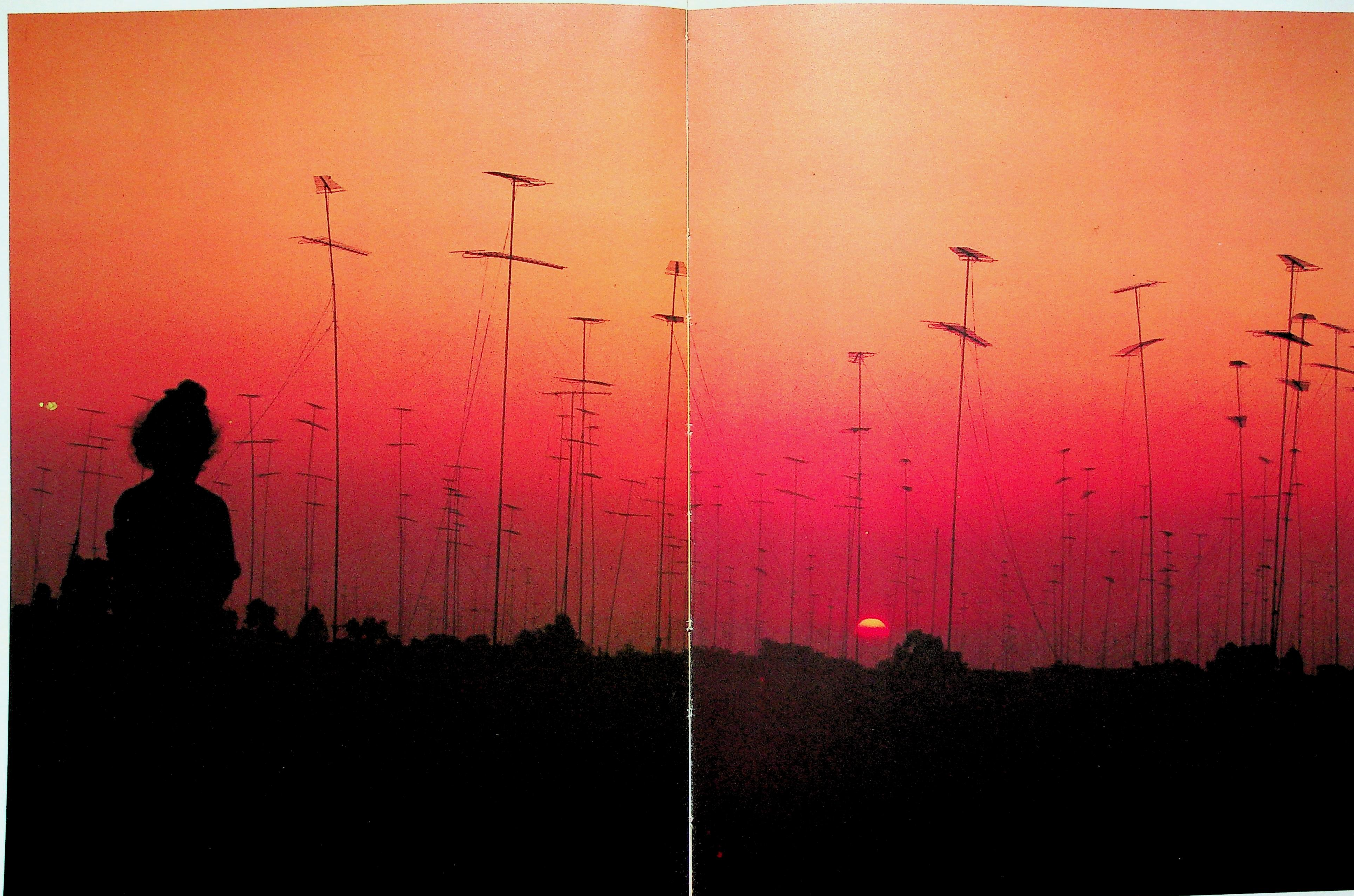
An adventurous Sikh atop a tower overlooking the city of Amritsar.



A young Sikh displays his *kirpan*. On his turban he wears the Khalsa emblem consisting of a quoit with a double-edged dagger running through it and two *kirpans* crossing underneath. In the quoit is the symbol *ik onkar*—meaning there is one God.



Young Khalsa. The boy sports a *chakra* (quoit) round his saffron coloured turban. His sister carries *kadas* (steel bracelets), which are the emblems of the Khalsa, to take as presents for her family.



Sky is the limit. The forest of television aerials in Chandigarh, the capital of the Punjab, gives an idea of the prosperity that has come to the State.



A touch of royalty. Amarendra Singh of Patiala, now a Member of Parliament, still endeavours to maintain the life-style of his Maharaja forefathers.



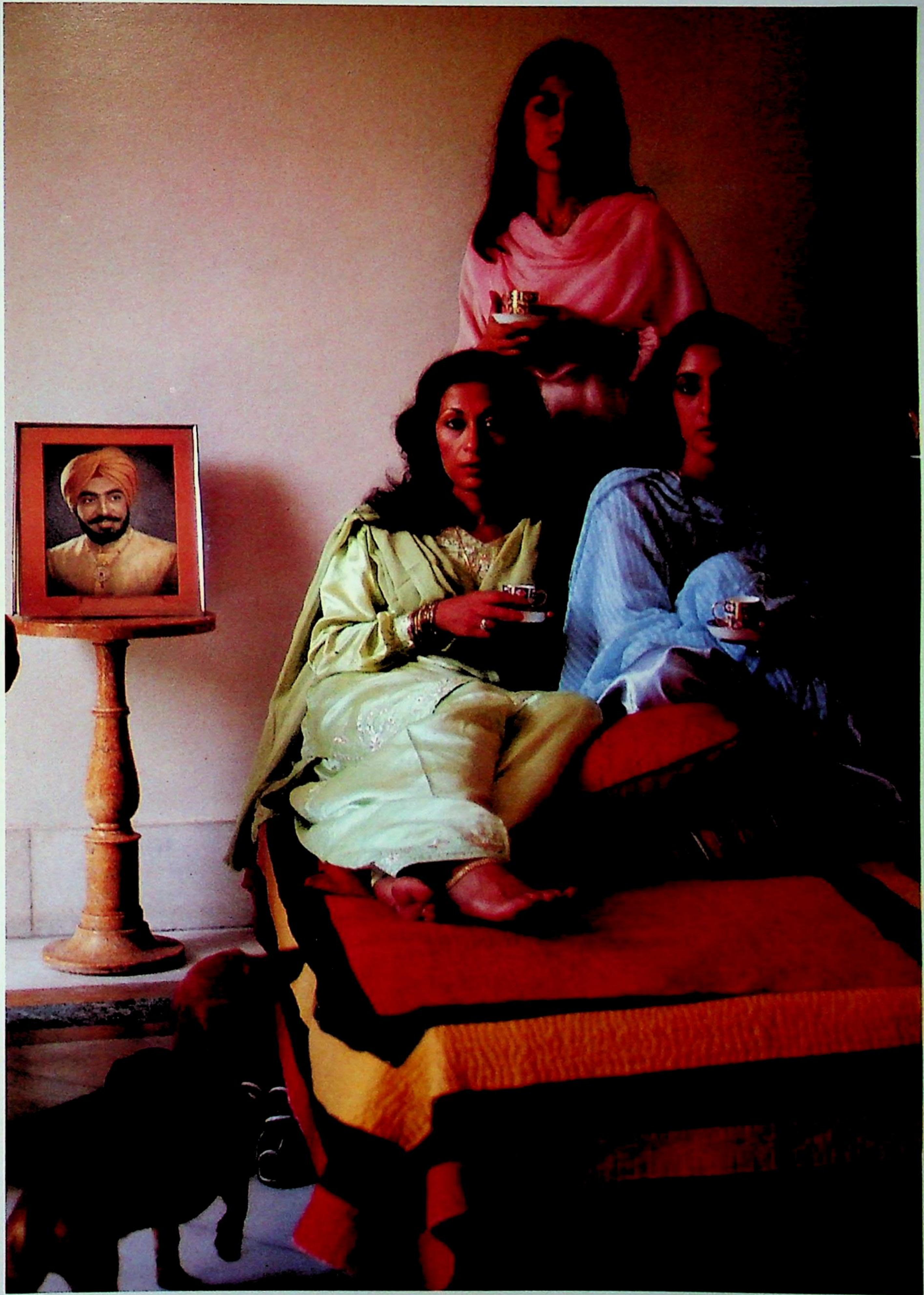
Poetess Laureate, Amrita Pritam, first woman to win the coveted Gnanpith Award for literature. Her poems and novels are widely read in India and Pakistan.



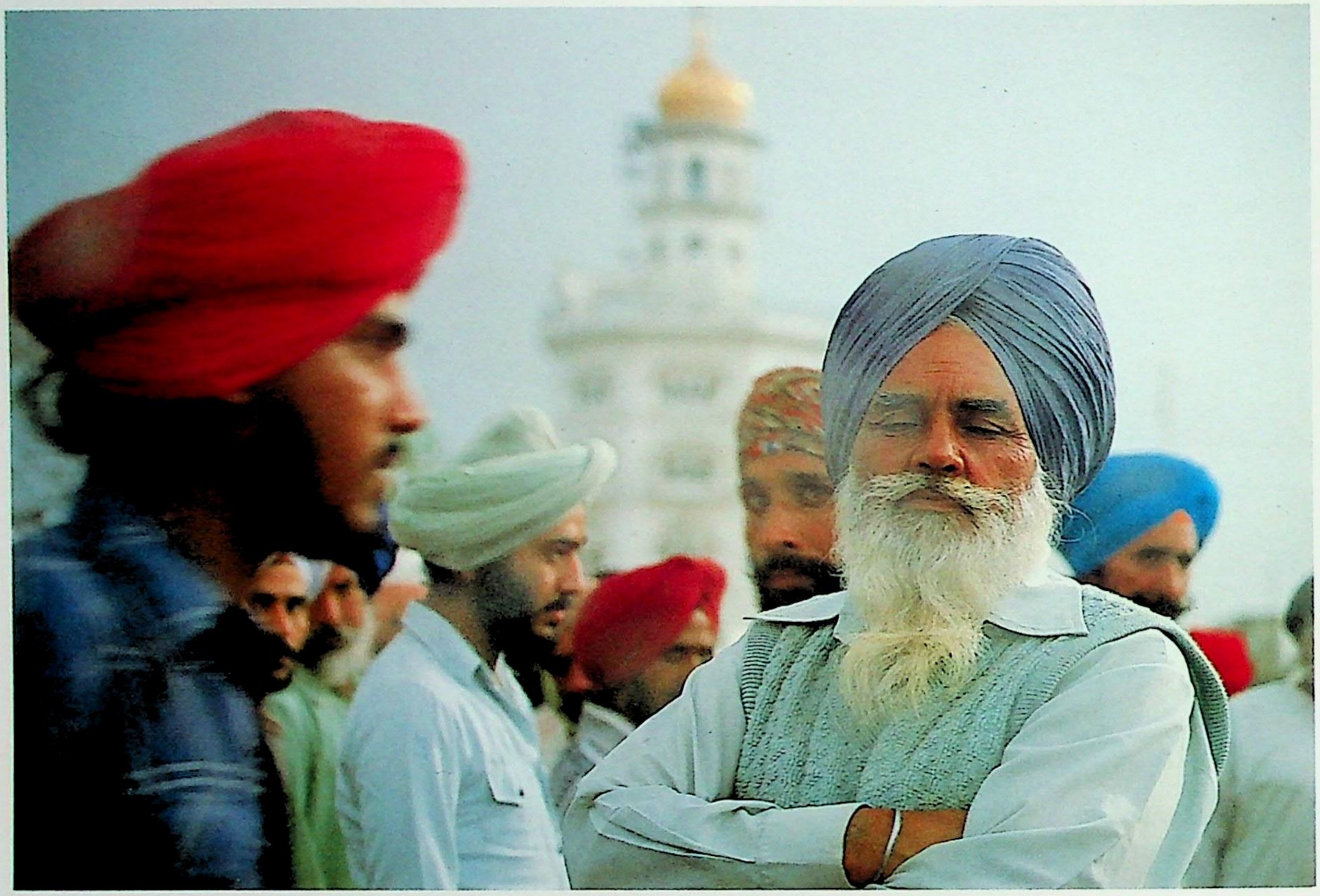
Air Chief Marshal Dilbagh Singh, Chief of the Air Staff, Indian Air Force. He is the second Sikh to head the IAF.
The first was Air Chief Marshal Arjan Singh.



Cosy interior. A westernised sikh home in Delhi with the daughter of the house in her rocking chair.



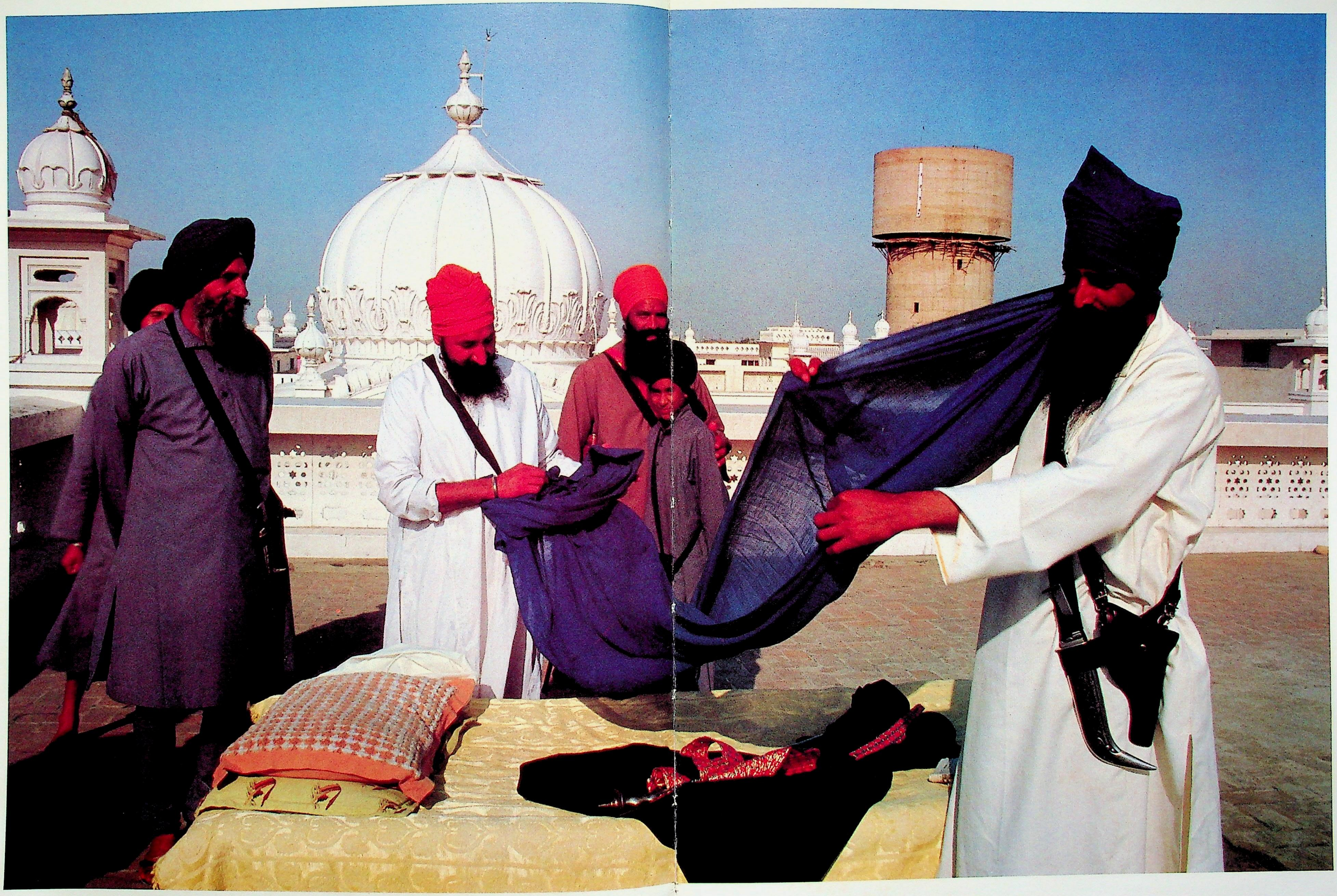
Most Sikh women wear their traditional *salwar-kameez* with a *dupatta* or scarf to cover their heads.



Rugged and handsome. Most young Sikhs tie up their beards under their chins but in recent years many prefer to display them flowing.



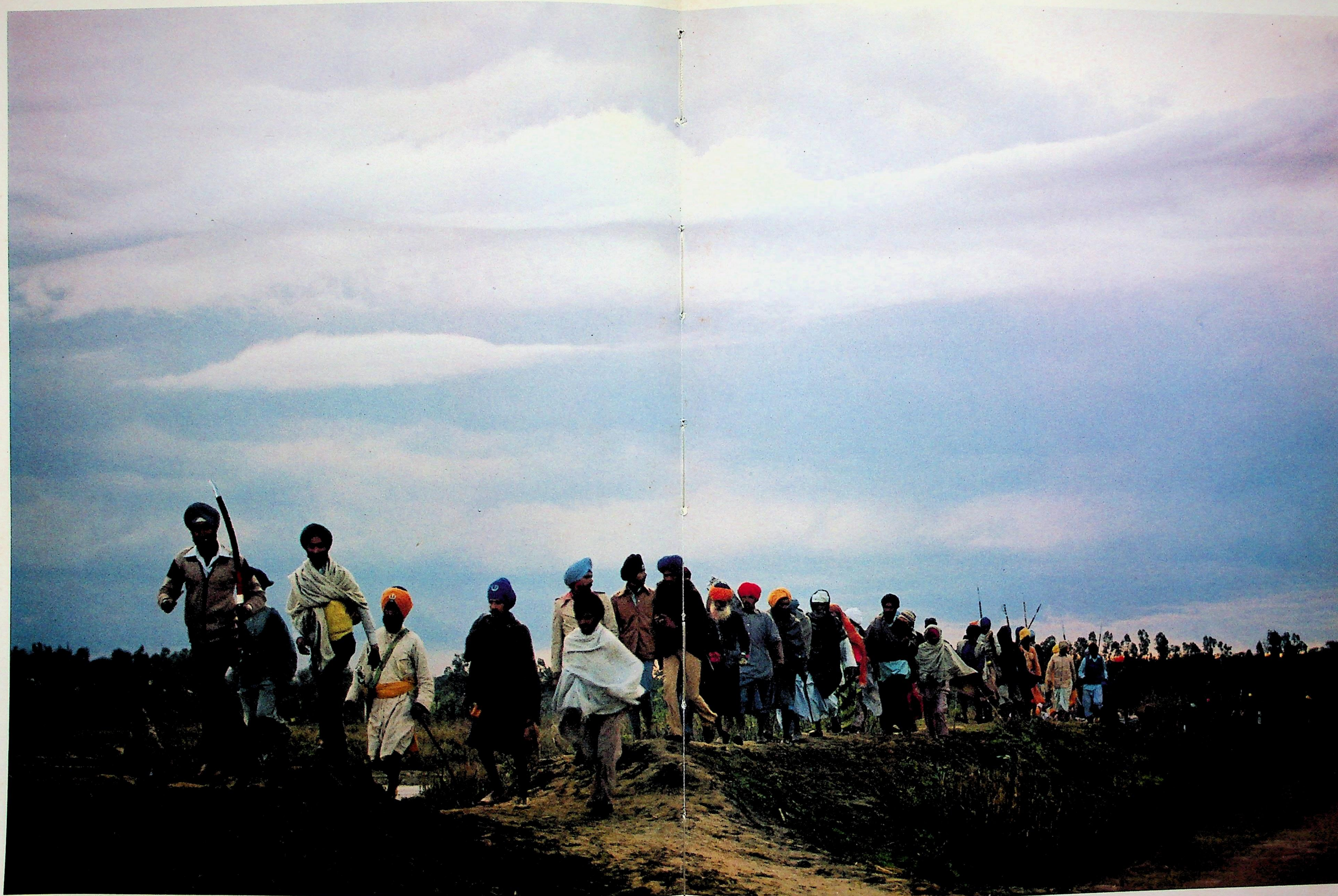
The Powerful Three: Gurcharan Tohra, MP and President of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee which manages all Sikh temples, Sant Harcharan Singh Longowal, chosen to head negotiations with the Government and Prakash Singh Badal who has twice been Chief Minister of the Punjab.



Head cover. Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale tying his blue turban before appearing in public. Bhindranwale has emerged as the stormy petrel of Sikh politics and spokesman of Sikh religious fundamentalism.



Political militants. Members of the Akali Party stop traffic (*rasta roko*) to force the Government to concede their demands.



On the way to Amritsar. An entire Sikh village on march to the holy city.



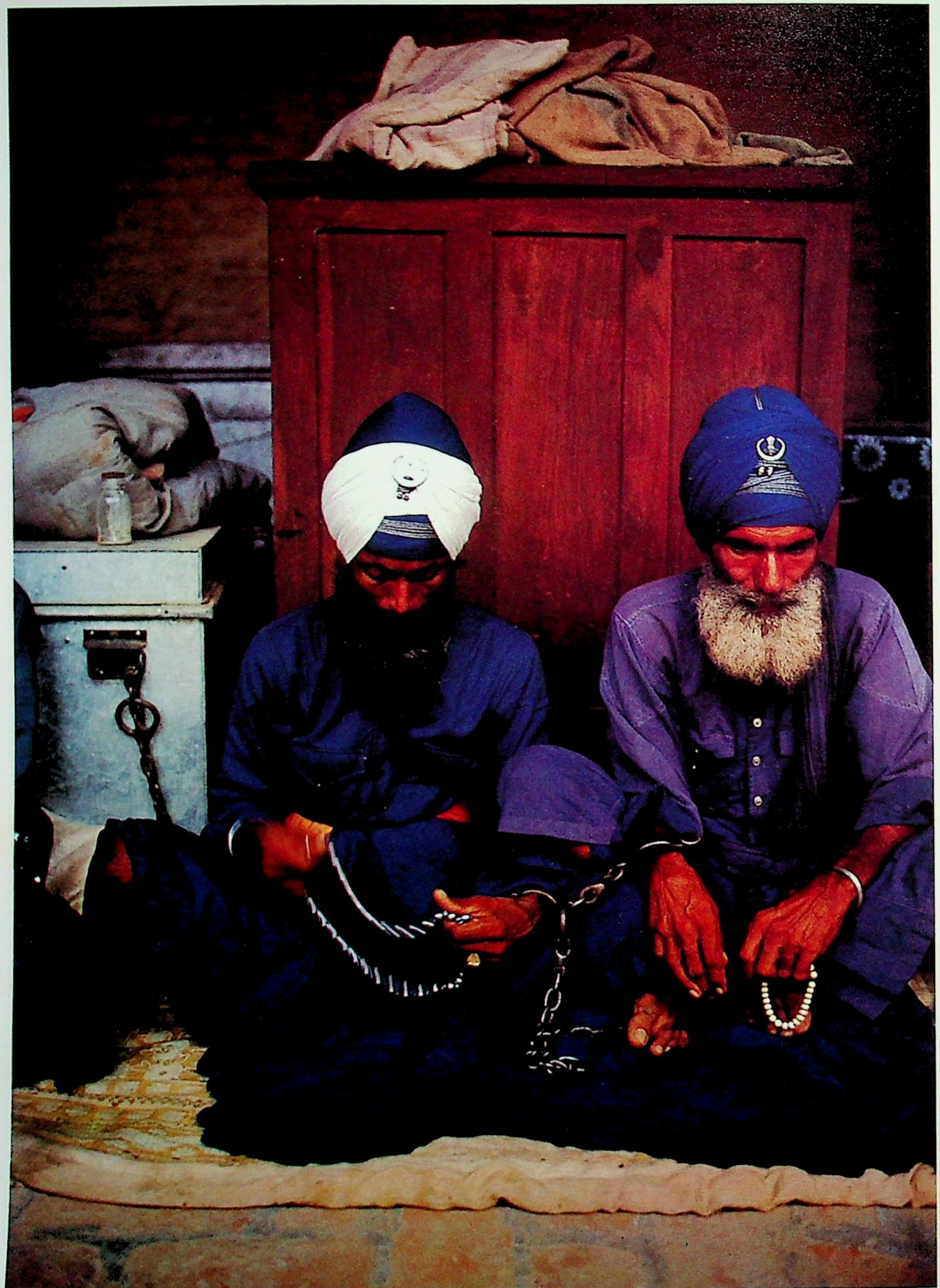
Santa Singh, Nihang leader, self-styled Sultan-ul-Qaum, i.e. King of the Community, with his bodyguards.



Ritual feet washing. The Nihangs—from the Persian for crocodile—were the Sikh equivalent of the Japanese Samurai and once formed the suicide squads of the Sikh armies. They are divided into two fraternities, the Buddha Dal (old army) and the Taruna Dal (young army).



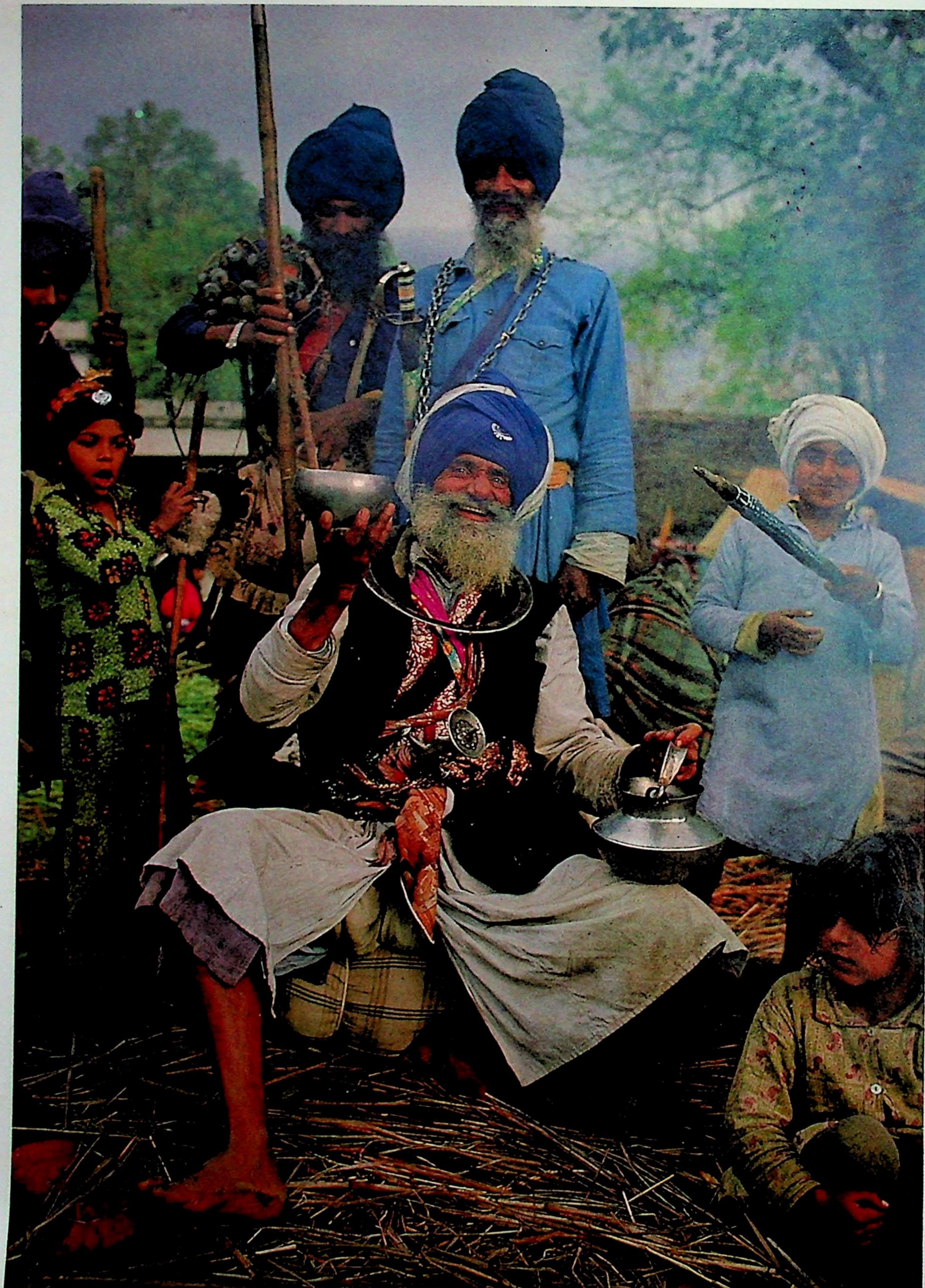
The Guru's kitchen in a Nihang encampment. Every Sikh *gurdwara* provides free food to all visitors.



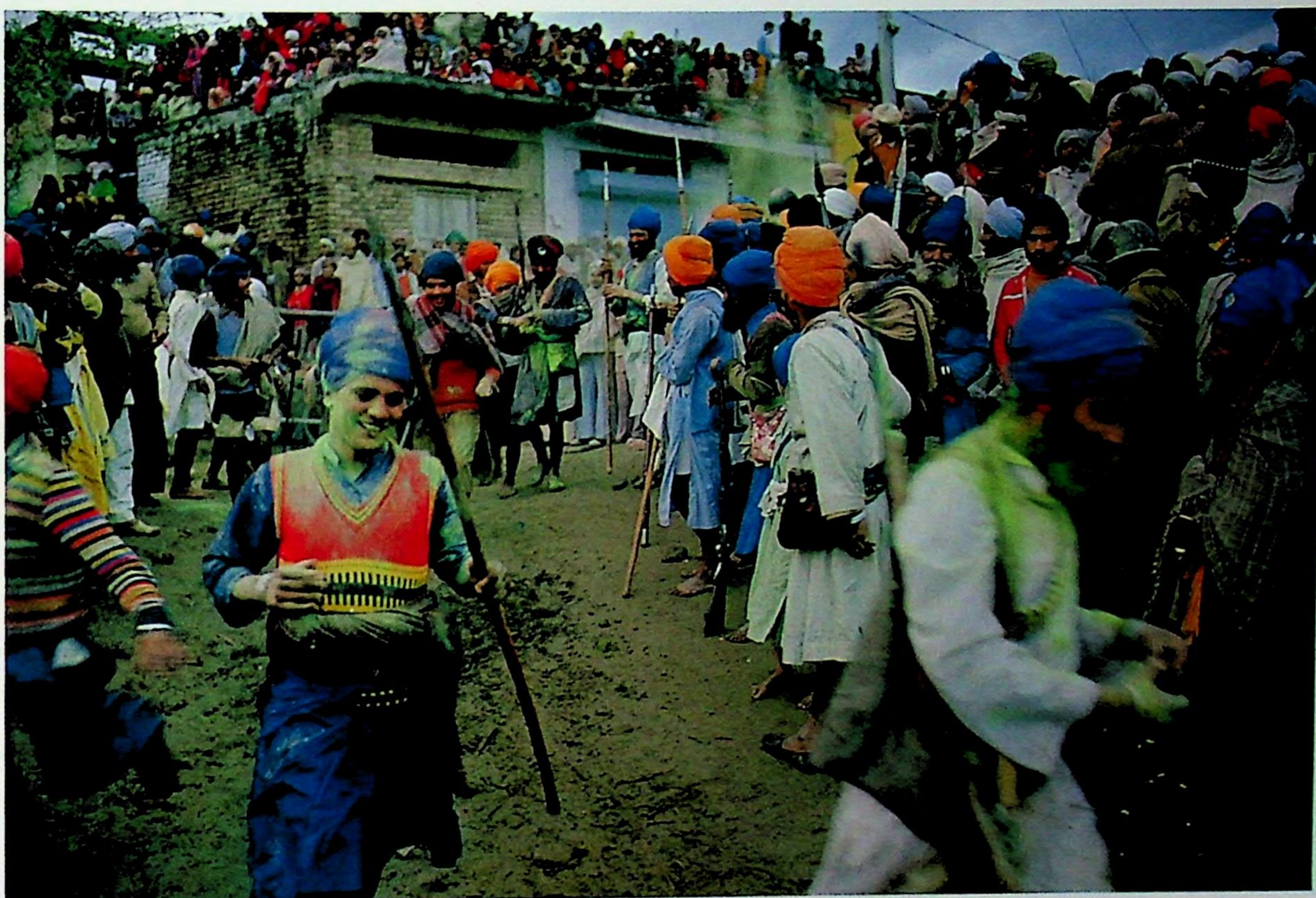
The Nihangs maintain an iron discipline. The errant are handcuffed and perform penance ordered by their leader.



A peasant army. Spears and swords remain the Sikhs' favourite arms.



Praise the Peace-Giver! Nihangs are notorious drinkers of *bhang* (hashish) which they describe as *sukkha pershad*—the peace-giver.



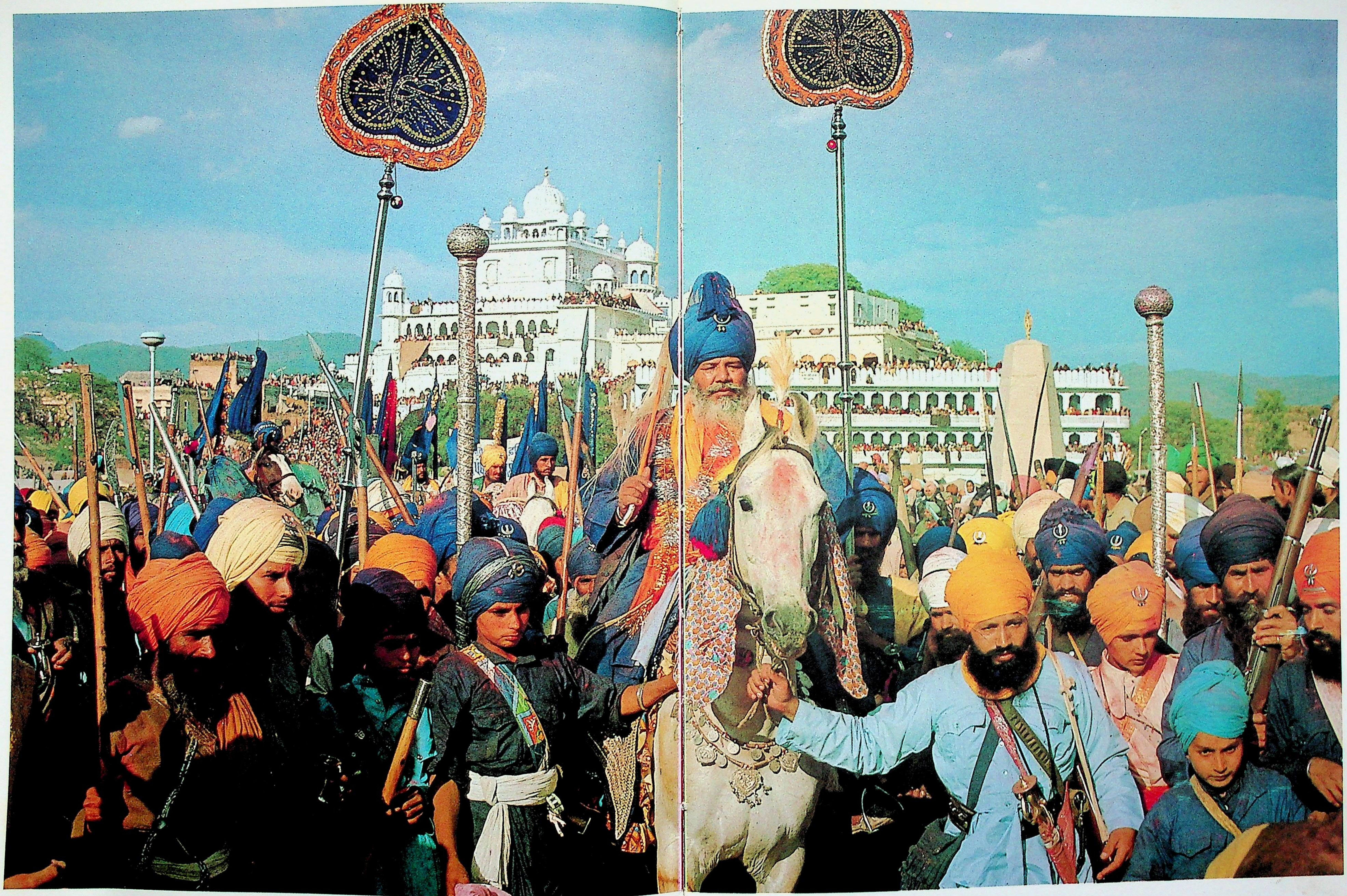
Guns, swords, spears, staves and smiles. Ancient games are kept alive at fairs and festivals.



Nihang canteen. Leader examines cooking and serving arrangements at his camp.



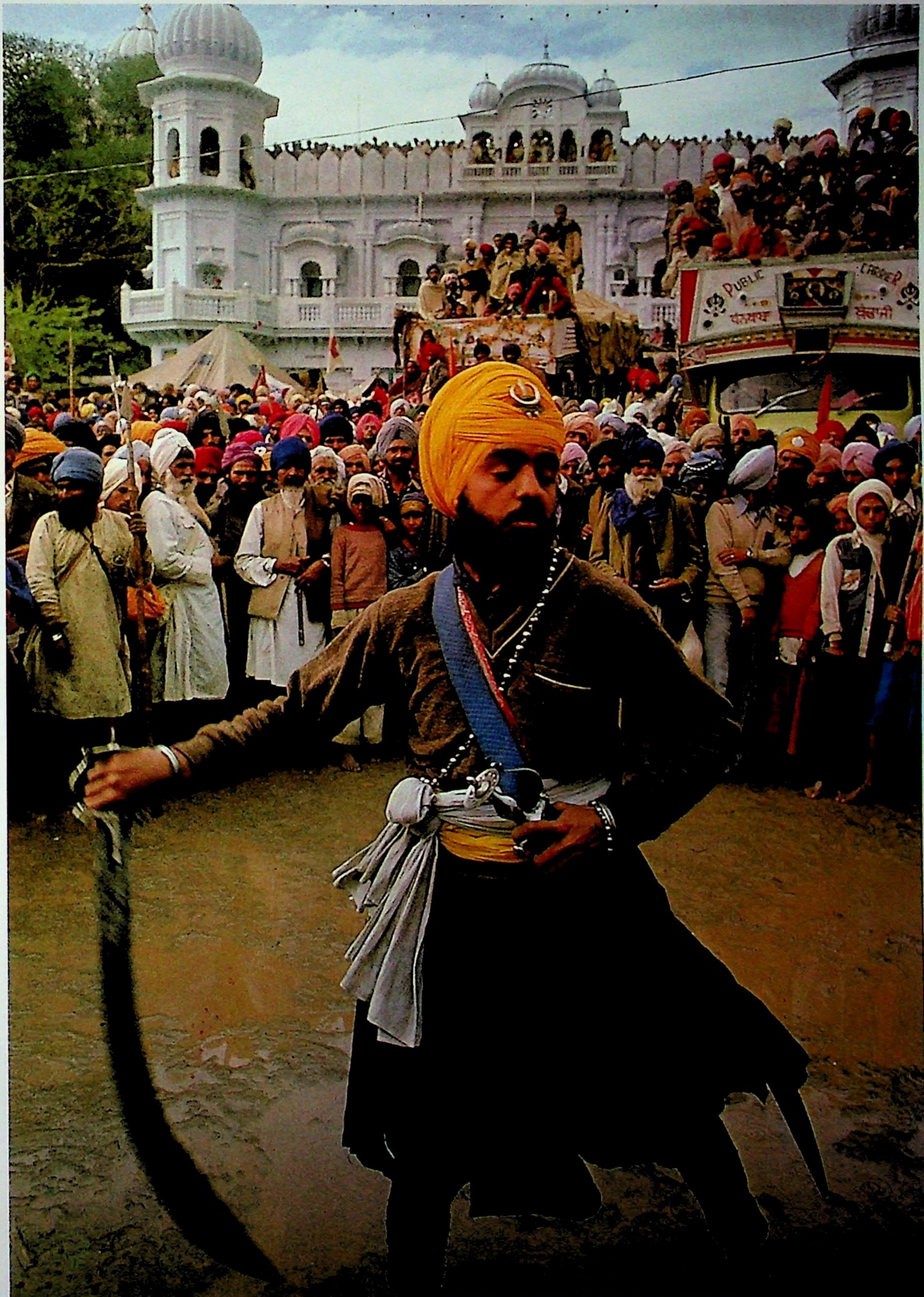
The Nihang Chief on his white charger. Santa Singh arrives on his gaudily caparisoned steed to join his troops.
The favourite colours of the Nihangs are steel blue and saffron yellow.



The monarch of all he surveys. Santa Singh led to an inspection of his forces. The backdrop is the Anandpur temple.



Swords for sale. The *kirpan* is one of the five essential 'K' that every Sikh must always carry on his or her person.



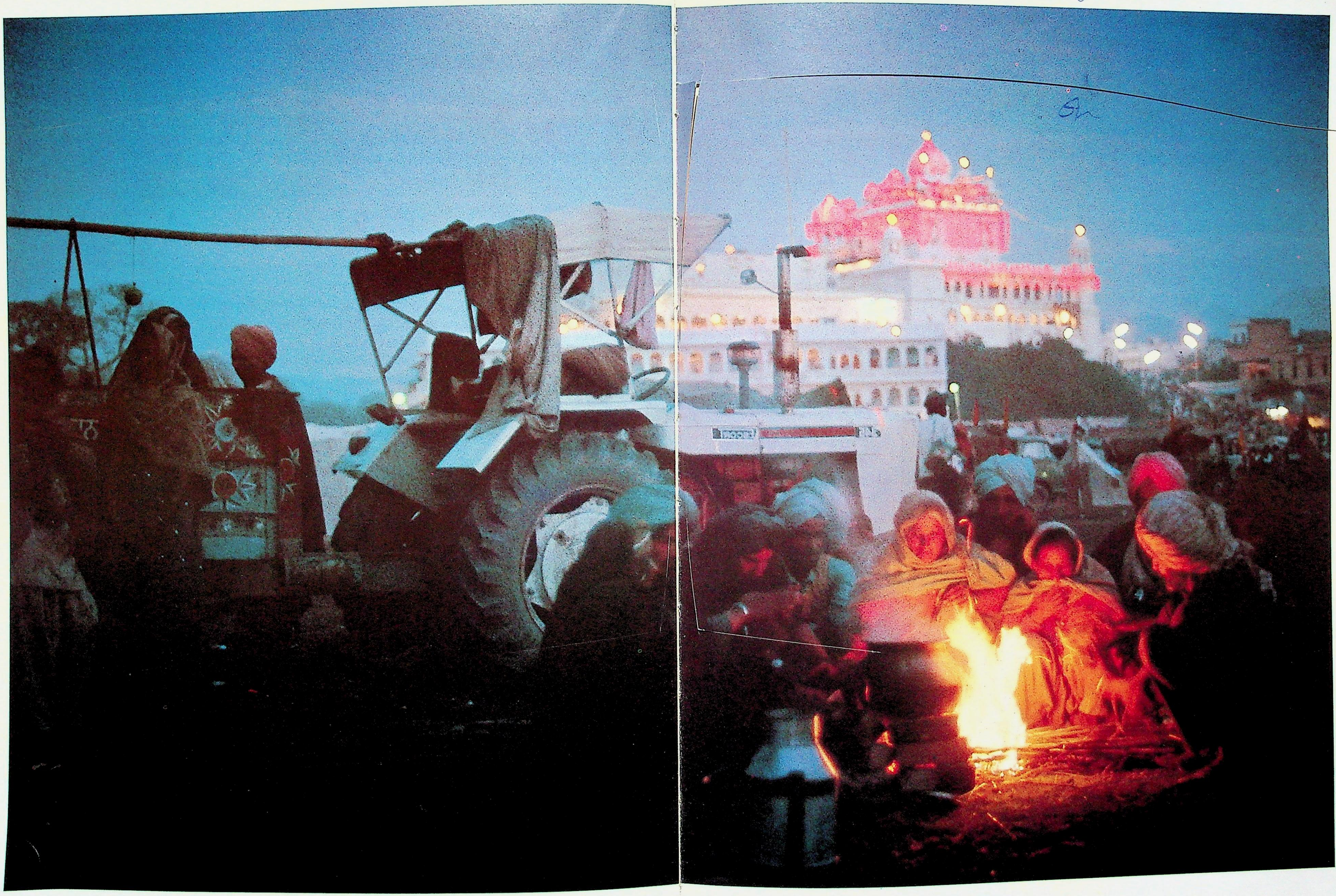
Sword dancing at Anandpur. A novitiate displays his prowess with the *kirpan* (sabre)

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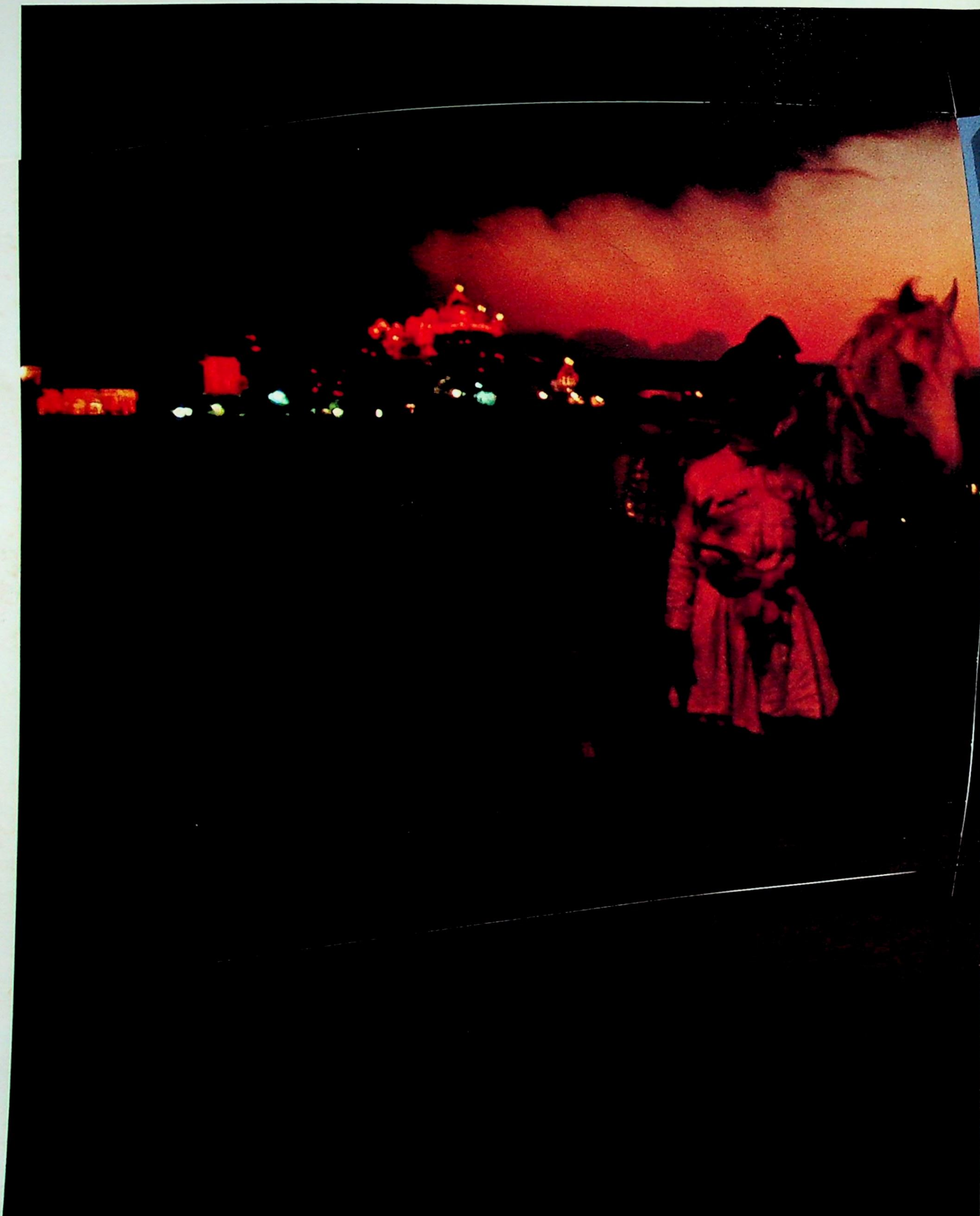
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Sword play and thunder-clouds. The young neophytes are American disciples of Yogi Bhajan.



Evening by a campfire. The gaily lit up Anandpur Sahib *gurdwara* with pilgrims preparing their evening meal besides their tractor.

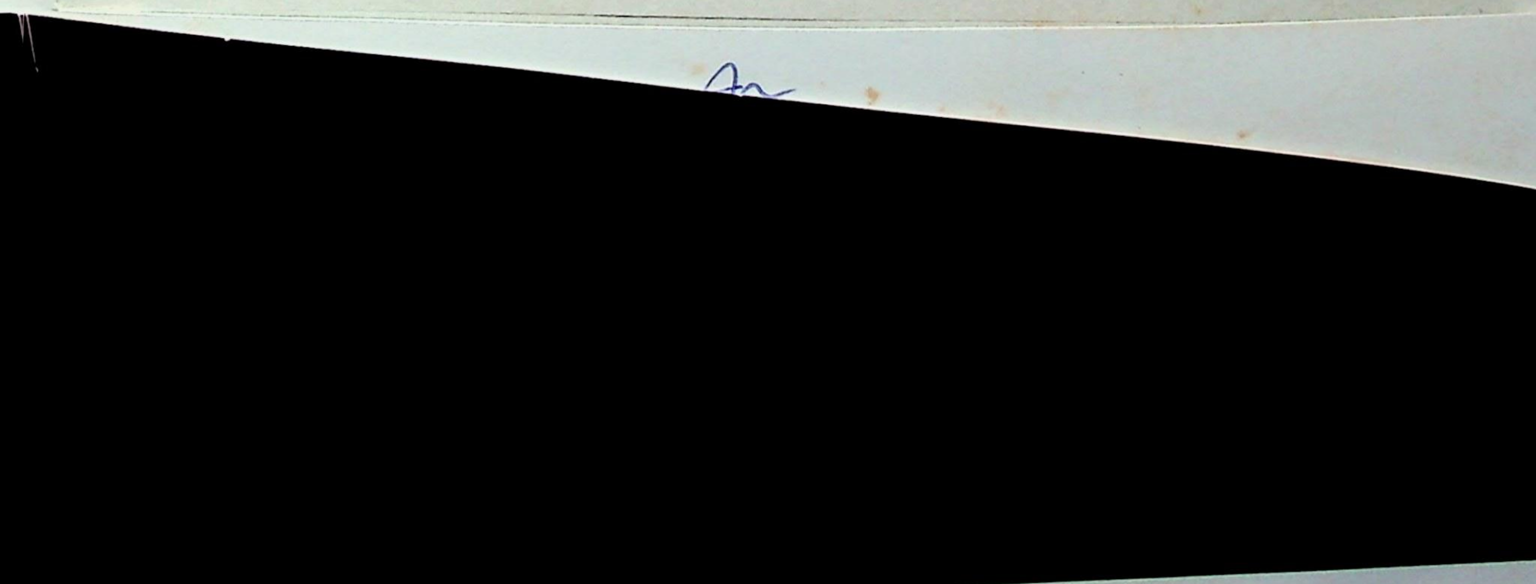


The long day ends. A rider and his horse wend their weary way back to their village.



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Sacred reflection. An elderly lady reads the *Sukhmani* or the Psalm of Peace, composed by Guru Arjun, by the pool-side of the Golden Temple.

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KHUSHWANT SINGH, who has written the text, is the author of a definitive two-volume history and religion of the Sikhs published by Princeton and Oxford University Presses. His two novels *Train to Pakistan* and *I Shall not Hear the Nightingale* as well as his innumerable collections of short stories and translations are all set in the Punjab. He has been a regular contributor to *The New York Times* and many other prestigious American journals. He has been the editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and *The Hindustan Times*. He has won the Grove Press Award for the best work of fiction from India and has been bestowed the Robe of Honour by the Punjab Government and the title of Padma Bhushan by the Government of India. He is a member of the Upper House of the Indian Parliament, the Rajya Sabha.

RAGHU RAI, one of India's most talented photographers, has won many national and international awards. His photographs have appeared in *Geo, Paris Match, Stern, Time, Newsweek* and other important publications of the world and twenty-five of his photographs are in the permanent collection of Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris.